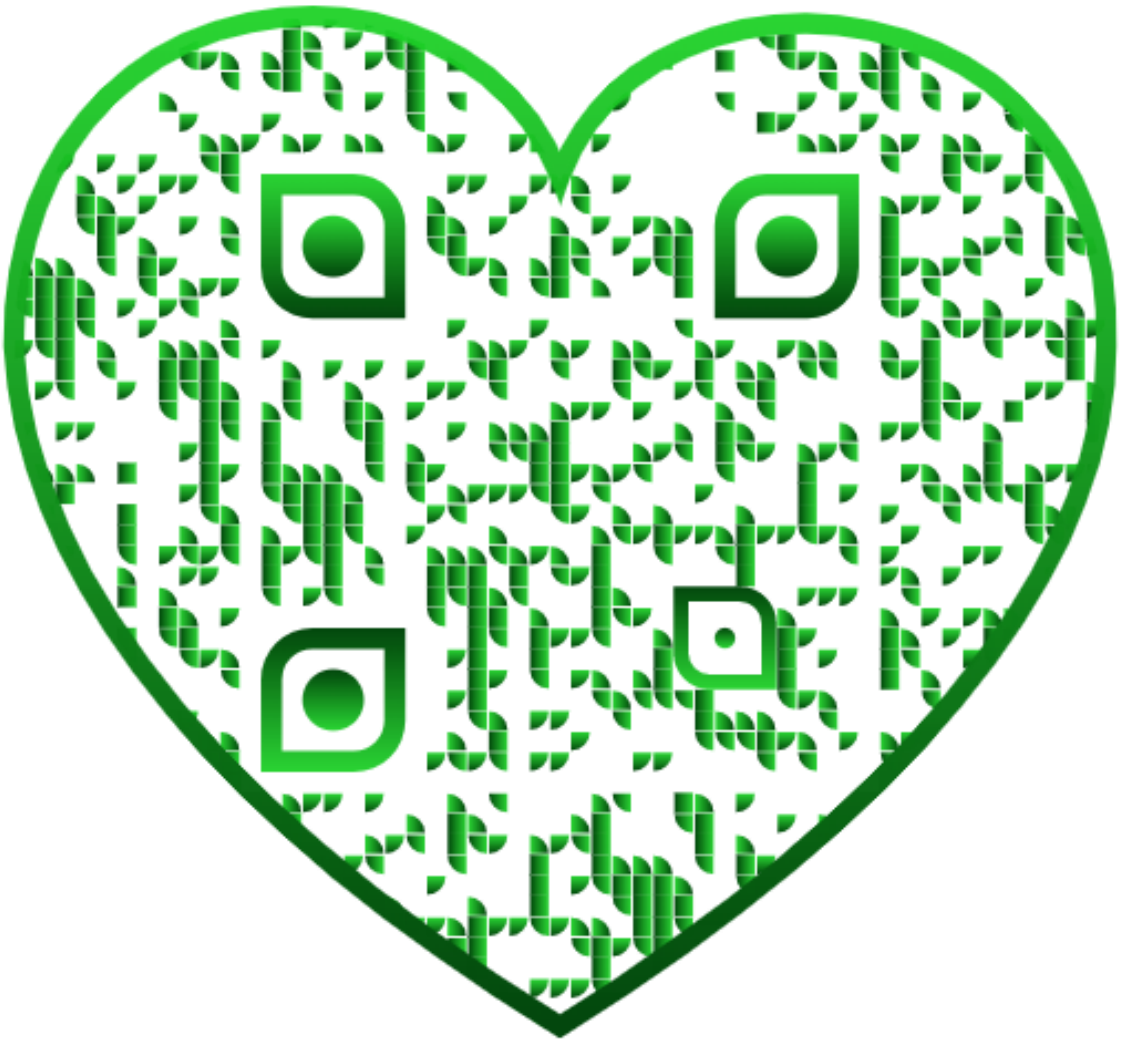
QUINTA BRUNSON LILY GLADSTONE KALI UCHIS CHAKA KHAN

Rolling Stone

JANUARY 2024
ISSUE 1383

THE WORLD BELONGS TO

21 SAVAGE



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'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

"My dad saw early on when I was onstage that I just thrived."

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On getting her start acting in local plays in rural Montana

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1957-2023

Shane MacGowan

The charismatic **Irish** snarler **who** fronted the Pogues died **at** age 65 on Nov. **30, drawing** eulogies from around **the** world. In a **heartfelt** tribute, *Rolling Stone*'s **Rob** Sheffield **quoted** MacGowan's words from the Pogues' classic "The **Sick Bed** of **Cúchulainn": "Then** they'll take you **to** Cloughprior/ And **shove** you **in** the **ground/But** you'll stick your head back **out** and shout 'We'll have **another** round!'"

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On the Cover

21 Savage photographed in Paris on Nov. 13, 2023, by **Thibaut Grevet**.

Photography direction by Emma Reeves. Produced by Division: Gwendoline Victoria, head of fashion films and content; Anne-Sophie Dujon, senior project manager; Réda Madjid, project manager; Mateo Murga, line producer. Hair by Yann Turchi for Bryant Artists. Makeup by Lindzy. Styling by Fatima B. for Mastermind Mgmt. Seamstress: Guillem Rodriguez. Set design by Félix Gesnouin for Total World. Black leather trench by Burberry.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: ANTON CORBIJN/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES; © HENRY TAYLOR. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH; PHOTO BY SAM KAHN; COUGHS; JEREMY PEDRON "SQUATINGDOG"

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475 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10017
212.213.1900

LOS ANGELES OFFICE
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ROLLING STONE (ISSN 0035-791x) is published 12 times per year, which is subject to change at any time, by Penske Business Media, LLC, 475 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to ROLLING STONE Customer Service, P.O. Box 37505, Boone, IA 50037-0505. Canadian Postmaster: Send address changes and returns to P.O. Box 63, Malton CFC, Mississauga, Ontario L4T3B5. Canada Poste publication agreement #40683192. International Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No. 450553. The entire contents of ROLLING STONE are copyright © 2024 by ROLLING STONE LLC, and may not be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, without written permission. All rights are reserved.

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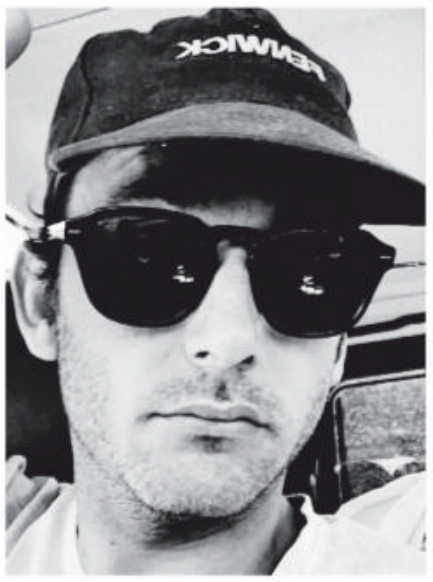
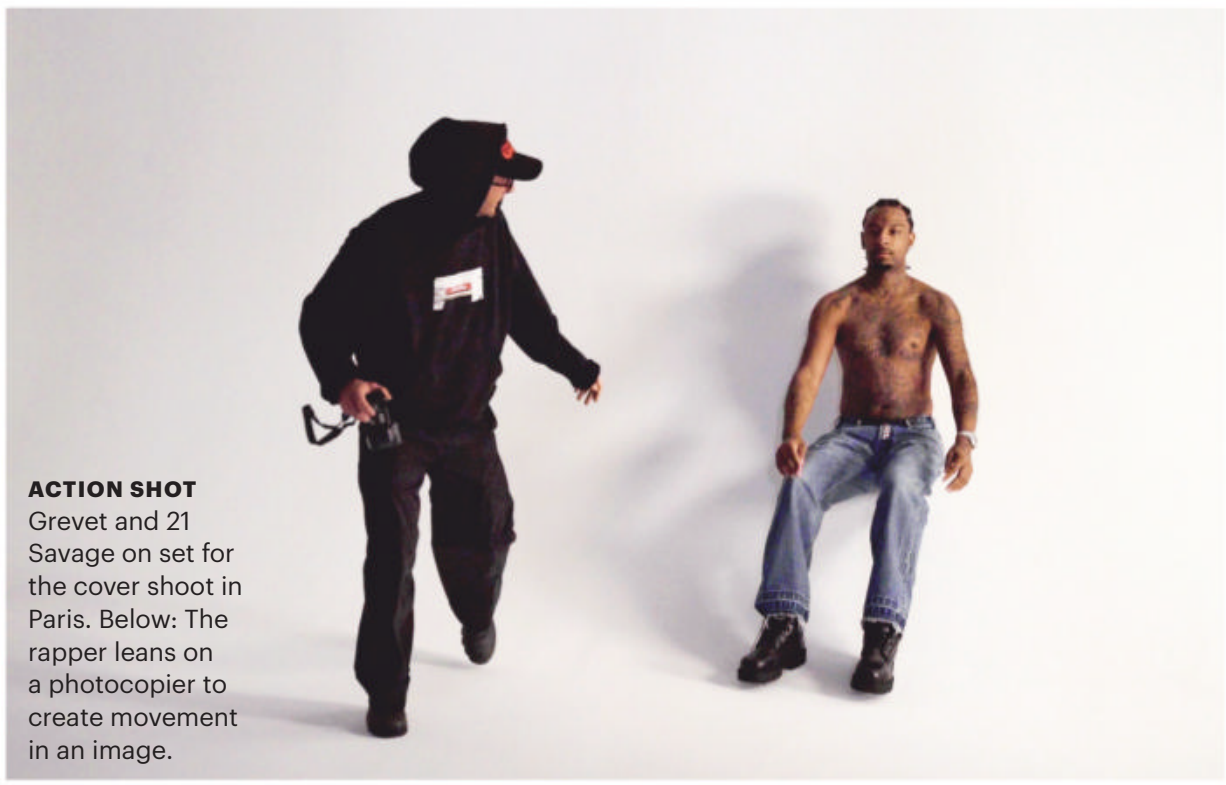
COVER STORY

Capturing 21 Savage's Many Faces



Thibaut Grevet
Photographer

For the January cover of 21 Savage, French director and photographer Thibaut Grevet wanted to infuse the shot with movement. "An image is static — it's not like a video," Grevet explains. "It's something that you can print and stick on a wall.... It stays the same." To create the abstract shapes and shadows you see in the final spread, Grevet actually had 21 Savage press his face against an on-set photocopier — the abstract result represents the rapper's music genius and unique backstory. Before working with icons like Virgil Abloh and Travis Scott, Grevet was mainly focused on videography. Soon, he learned to blend the worlds of stationary and active art. In 2022, Grevet published his passion project, *Blurred,* a photography book that, he says, "combines all these abstract moments of my life."



ACTION SHOT Grevet and 21 Savage on set for the cover shoot in Paris. Below: The rapper leans on a photocopier to create movement in an image.

Kimberly Aleah
Head of Video

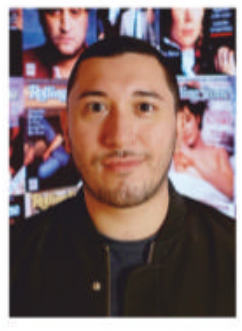
Rolling Stone was there for a pivotal life moment for 21 Savage: the rapper's climactic return home to the U.K. after immigration issues kept him from leaving the United States for decades. RS's head of video Kimberly Aleah learned that Savage's longtime personal videographer, Cedarian Wilson, was capturing intimate scenes that extended beyond a typical cover shoot's behind-the-scenes footage. "It's a portrait of this moment that's very important to this artist and his trajectory," Aleah says of Wilson's work. As an Atlanta native, Aleah was proud to bear witness to 21 Savage's unique experience fostered by his A-Town team. "It's a beautiful little family portrait," she says. Since joining *Rolling Stone* in 2019, Aleah has focused on telling stories from diverse perspectives, and leads an all-women video team.

Using Facts to Find the Feelings

Brenna Ehrlich
Chief Research Editor

Brenna Ehrlich builds a story like "The Ivy League Body Bandits" (p. 48) by searching for sources and sifting through court documents. She used lawsuits to mine the heart of the grotesque crime: "'Well, what about all the families? What about the people? What if that were my mom,'" Ehrlich asked. Her affinity for true crime focuses on criminal-justice reform, and advocacy for victims and their loved ones. Beyond *Rolling Stone*, Ehrlich is a volunteer for criminal-justice nonprofit Empowerment Avenue and a YA author. Her novel *Killing Time* was published in 2022.

Let the Games Begin



Christopher Cruz
Executive Producer, Branded Content

Though Christopher Cruz's official title is executive producer for the branded-content studio, he is *Rolling Stone*'s unofficial resident gamer. Since coming on in 2016, Cruz has covered the ever-growing gaming market. A lifetime gamer, Cruz is the mastermind behind the January issue's gaming package, which focuses on the industry's future: from *Fortnite*'s foray into a "viable" metaverse to the advent of games turned into Hollywood blockbusters and TV hits. "The golden age of superheroes is dead," Cruz proclaims. "The golden age of gaming is beginning."

The Power of Gen Z

Cassady Rosenblum
Writer

In 2016, freelance journalist Cassady Rosenblum was a history teacher shaping the minds of high school students. Now, using this personal perspective and ability to connect with young people, Rosenblum has written "Gen Z vs. the Gerontocracy" (p. 26) for this issue. Her shift to journalism came after she was "disillusioned with education," and frustrated with "the idea of meritocracy as a pathway to mobility," and the ways in which educators teach that to their students. Previously, Rosenblum wrote investigative reports on psychedelics for *Rolling Stone*.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: COURTESY OF THIBAUT GREVET, MARIA KRYVOBOK; 2; COURTESY OF KIMBERLY ALEAH; COURTESY OF BRENNA EHRLICH; IAN BLAU; COURTESY OF CASSADY ROSENBLUM

Opening Act

A Night Full of Musical Connection in Brooklyn

ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE in Brooklyn was full of good vibes and a spirit of musical collaboration on Nov. 10, as two pairs of unique talents — Lil Yachty and Tierra Whack, and Jon Batiste and Gucci Mane — took the stage for *Rolling Stone*'s first-ever Musicians on Musicians live event. First up were Yachty and Tierra, who showed off their bond as close friends and collaborators. They talked about their influences (Yachty chose Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon,* while Tierra shouted out Busta Rhymes' "Gimme Some More"), shared new music, and made some headlines when Yachty criticized the "terrible" state of hip-hop today. Next, Batiste and Gucci revealed their creative secrets and connected over their experiences growing up in the South. "The biggest blessing of recognition is when your peers respect what you do," said Batiste, who started that morning by being nominated for six Grammy Awards. Later, he took a seat at the grand piano onstage and played a six-minute solo version of Gucci's 2009 classic "Lemonade." All night, the artists fed off one another's energy. "I feel like since we've been talking, I got beaucoup ideas already," Batiste said.

Lil Yachty, Tierra Whack, Jon Batiste, and Gucci Mane (from left) backstage in Brooklyn

VERSACE

WITHOUT YOU THERE'S NO THEM

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You play a crucial role in the survival of the world's most extraordinary wildlife.
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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT,

Lily Gladstone Is Seizing the Moment

The actress is poised to land an Oscars first, and she's been ready her whole life

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Carlos Jaramillo**

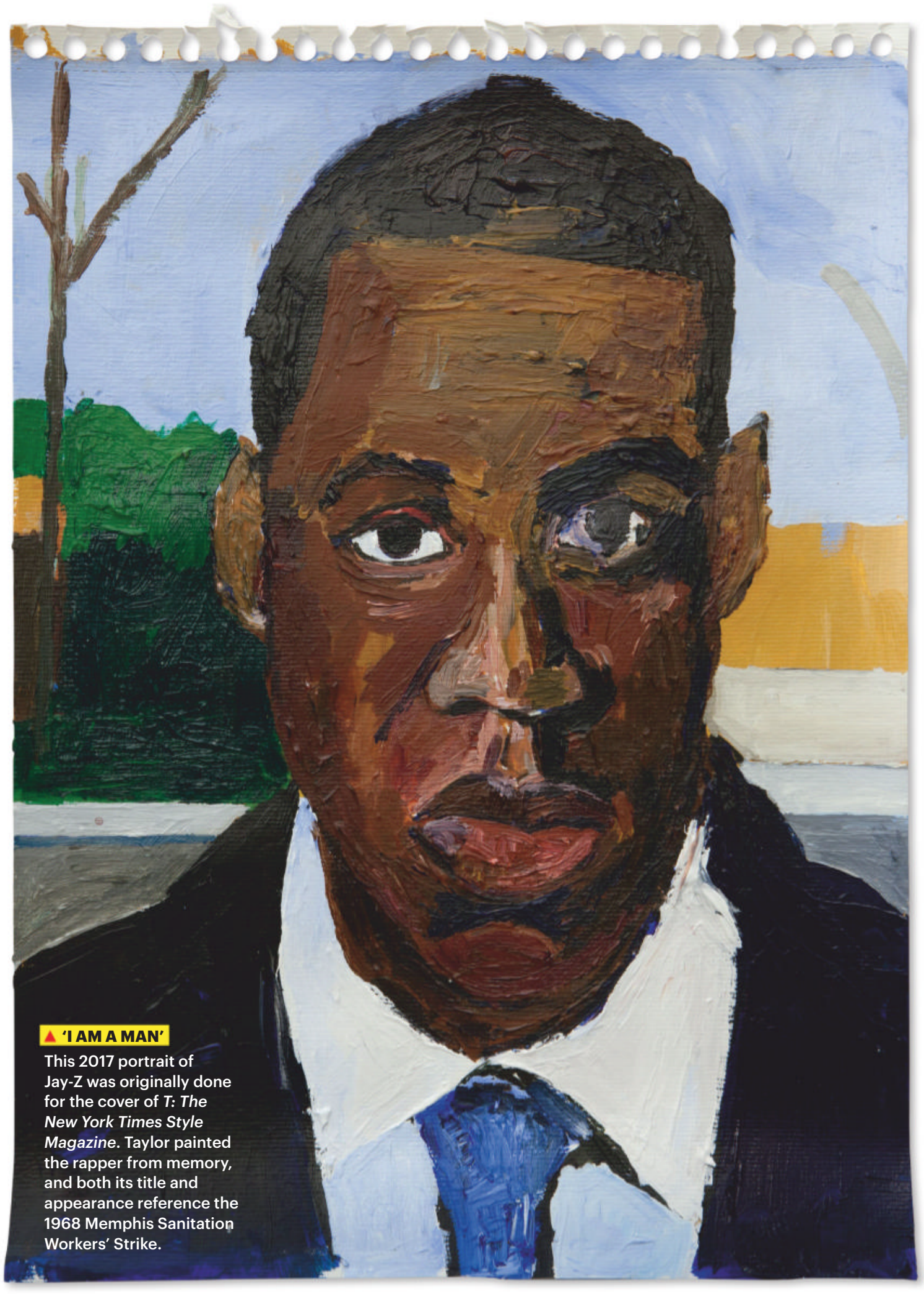
ART

The Vivid World of Henry Taylor

IN THE WHITNEY MUSEUM'S New York exhibit "Henry Taylor: B Side," histories are flashes, imprints – brief, bright, imagined moments built into energetic scenes. Sometimes faces aren't as important as stances: a clenched fist here, a tensed shoulder there. Whether his subject is a famous rapper or a stranger he met on the streets in his hometown of L.A., Taylor, 65, pulls in the viewer. "There's no other artist that really creates that sense of intimacy," curator Barbara Haskell says.

The show's title puts Taylor's work in a musical context – fitting, since music and popular culture often play such a key role in his art. From a portrait of Jay-Z to a mural drawn onsite that includes brushed lyrics of Kendrick Lamar's "DNA" (Lamar also used Taylor's paintings as a backdrop on his recent tour), Taylor superimposes the past onto the present, overlaying the world we know now with the history of being Black in America. CT JONES

Above: Taylor's 2012 painting "Sweet," as seen at Kendrick Lamar's Lollapalooza performance last summer. Taylor's tribute to Lamar in "B Side" looks over a floor-to-ceiling window, giving his "DNA" lyrics their own center stage.



▲ 'I AM A MAN'
This 2017 portrait of Jay-Z was originally done for the cover of *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*. Taylor painted the rapper from memory, and both its title and appearance reference the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike.

LILY GLADSTONE

WHEN LILY GLADSTONE was growing up on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in rural Montana, acting in plays was an escape. The idea came from her father, a Native man of Piegan Blackfeet and Nez Perce heritage, whom she describes as "a bit of a wizard."

"My dad saw early on when I was onstage that I just thrived," Gladstone says. "When I was nine, it was the worst of it. I was struggling to keep friendships, bullied a lot. And he very matter-of-factly said, 'Oh, it's OK, honey. They're all going to be your friend someday when you win your Oscar.' "

She smiles. "Like I said, my dad's a little bit of a wizard. And when you're a kid and your dad who can move clouds tells you something like that, you think it's true."

Now, all these years later, Gladstone may become the first Native American winner for acting in Oscar history for her quietly powerful turn as Mollie Burkhart, an Osage woman preyed upon by her husband, Ernest (Leonardo DiCaprio), and his rapacious uncle William Hale (Robert De Niro) in Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Adapted from David Grann's bestselling nonfiction book, it's a harrowing portrait of the Reign of Terror, a period in the 1920s when Osage were systematically murdered by white settlers for the rights to their oil-rich land. Gladstone's Mollie is the film's beating heart, reflecting her people's pain through her eyes.

It's that ability to evoke empathy that first caught Scorsese's attention in Kelly Reichardt's 2016 film *Certain Women*, in which Gladstone played a lonely rancher.

"There are so few actors who trust in stillness, quiet – and that trust comes from an extremely sharp understanding of their own presence," Scorsese says of Gladstone. "Actors used to call it their 'instrument' – maybe

FAST FACTS

ACTIVIST
Gladstone shines a light on domestic violence with the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center.

AWARDS DARLING
She won a 2023 Gotham Award for *The Unknown Country*.

PREVIOUS PAGE: HAIR BY MARC MENA AT EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS. MAKEUP BY MOLLY GREENWALD AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING CHEEKBONE BY PAT MCGRATH. STYLING BY JASON REMBERT. OUTFIT BY COACH. BODYSUIT BY WOLFORD. BOOTS BY JIMMY CHOO. EARRINGS BY JENNIFER YOUNGER. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY SAUL BARERRA. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY WILTON WHITE

◀ 'THE LOVE OF COUSIN TIP'

Painting in 2017 from a family photograph taken by his brother, Taylor depicted his cousins in a watchful stance in front of their home. "The pose is a kind of wariness, he's a little protective," Haskell says. "The whole canvas just kind of keeps you alert."

▼ 'HUEY NEWTON'

This 2007 portrait re-creates the famous photograph of the Black Panther founder, combining it with clippings about the 2006 police shooting of Sean Bell. "It's a perfect symbol of Black power," Haskell says. "Looking back to African royalty, and then bringing it up to the present."

▲ 'UNTITLED'

The exhibit also features objects, like this suitcase Taylor painted in 2021 for Tyler, the Creator. "The idea that Tyler used that suitcase as an accessory — he has a real wit, I think," Haskell says.

▶ 'BEFORE GERHARD RICHTER THERE WAS CASSI'

In 2017, Taylor reimagined Gerhard Richter's famous painting "Betty," as a tribute to post-colonial painter Cassi Namoda.

▶ 'A YOUNG MASTER'

In 2017, two years after painter Noah Davis died from a rare cancer at the age of 32, Taylor imbued his feelings of loss into a portrait of his departed friend as an even younger man. "They were very close," says Haskell. "It's about tenderness, but also this life cut short."

"Henry Taylor: B Side" is open through Jan. 28 at the Whitney Museum in NYC.

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: GRIFFIN LOTZ; © HENRY TAYLOR/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH. THIS PAGE, COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM TOP: © HENRY TAYLOR/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH/PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF MCLANE, 2; © HENRY TAYLOR/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH/PHOTOGRAPH BY SAM KAHN, 2; © HENRY TAYLOR/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

some still do. Lily is in complete command of her instrument. It's rare."

Cut to 2019 and Gladstone, in her mid-thirties with a few indies and small TV roles under her belt, was about to call it quits. As she sat in front of the computer ready to sign up for a data-analytics course, she received a notification for a meeting with Scorsese, who was beginning to cast *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

"I first met her on Zoom, with Leo DiCaprio," Scorsese recalls. "I had pretty much made up my mind at that point, but we did an audition and that was it."

When Gladstone found out she got the part, she lost it.

"There are so few actors who trust in stillness, quiet," says Martin Scorsese. "Lily is in complete command of her instrument. It's rare."

"I screamed and threw my phone across my parents' living room," she says. "And it was on Mollie Burkhart's birthday. The thought that it was Mollie's birthday meant that this was bigger than me."

The next thing Gladstone did was get back in front of that same computer to go online and start researching the Osage language. She took classes for seven weeks, studying with consultants Christopher Cote and Janis Carpenter. She gained such facility with the language and culture that Scorsese entrusted her with rewriting several scenes involving her character, including one in which she labels Ernest a "coyote," which came from an Osage story about "tricksters" that she'd heard from Cote.

Since the film's release, life has changed quickly. Recently, Gladstone was seated next to David Fincher at a film screening and the two struck up a conversation, with the *Zodiac* director offering her advice for navigating the award season.

"He compared it to his friend teaching his teenage daughter to drive on the freeway: 'Don't let how fast other people want to drive bully you into going faster than you're ready to,'" she remembers, before grinning to herself: "Things move at their own pace."

MARLOW STERN

Gaga and Phoenix in *Joker: Folie à Deux*

2024

Most Anticipated Movies

From 'Dune' to 'Wicked' – what you need to see this year

By DAVID FEAR

Madame Web
Feb. 14

Sony adds another notch on its Spiderverse belt with this story of a paramedic (Dakota Johnson) who discovers she has clairvoyant powers – and a connection to a trio of potential spider-women.

Drive-Away Dolls
Feb. 23

Ethan Coen goes solo with this dark comedy about friends (Margaret Qualley, Geraldine Viswanathan) who take off with some stolen loot. Pedro Pascal, Matt Damon, and Beanie Feldstein co-star.

Qualley (left) and Viswanathan

Butler

Dune: Part 2
March 1

Because he who controls the IP controls the universe! Denis Villeneuve finishes what he started with this second chapter of Frank Herbert's sci-fi epic, in which Zendaya and Timothée Chalamet save the universe, and a hairless, feral-looking Austin Butler freaks everybody TF out.

Mickey 17
March 29

South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho's follow-up to *Parasite* stars Robert Pattinson as an astronaut colonizing a far-away planet. Because space exploration is dangerous, he must clone himself – cue a good, old-fashioned existential crisis.

Challengers
April 26

Zendaya is Tashi Duncan, a teen tennis phenom and one corner of a love triangle between *West Side Story*'s Mike Faist and *The Crown*'s Josh O'Connor. Luca Guadagnino's sports drama promises steamy threesomes and a whole new meaning to the term "ground stroke."

Faist, Zendaya, and O'Connor (from left)

Furiosa
May 24

She helped Mad Max survive *Fury Road* – now find out how Imperator Furiosa became the badass rebel of George Miller's post-apocalyptic franchise. Anya Taylor-Joy steps into the battered boots once filled by Charlize Theron.

Beetlejuice 2
Sept. 6

Michael Keaton and director Tim Burton reunite for this sequel to the duo's 1988 classic, in which the ghost with the most now haunts the Jenna "Wednesday" Ortega. Say his name three times!

Joker: Folie à Deux
Oct. 4

Joaquin Phoenix returns for another round as the Man Who Laughs – but what has us jazzed is Lady Gaga (!) playing the Joker's sweetheart and literal partner in crime, the delightfully demented Harley Quinn (!!!).

Wicked: Part 1
Nov. 27

Broadway's *Wizard of Oz*-revising musical comes to the big screen, with Cynthia Erivo as the Wicked Witch of the West and Ariana Grande as Glinda the Good. Jeff Goldblum, Bowen Yang, and Michelle Yeoh follow them down the yellow brick road.

Mufasa: The Lion King
Dec. 20

Barry Jenkins calls the shots on this prequel to 2019's *Lion King* remake, which focuses on how Simba's dad became king of the jungle. The *Moonlight* filmmaker has promised laughs, tears, and some wonderful music numbers. Hakuna matata indeed.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: NIKO TAVERNISE/WARNER BROS.; WARNER BROS.; WORKING TITLE/FOCUS FEATURES; METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES

WITNESS

A Portrait of a Nazi Family During the Holocaust

Director Jonathan Glazer talks 'The Zone of Interest,' his film about an Auschwitz commandant's family

By DAVID FEAR

JONATHAN GLAZER WAS, by his own admission, a little lost. The writer-director behind *Sexy Beast* and *Under the Skin* had been chasing an unformed idea for a movie for years, uncertain of where he would go with the story or what he wanted to say about the subject. All he knew was that it haunted him, and he had to make it. Which is how Glazer found himself in Poland, wandering the site of one of the biggest mass murders of the 20th century. And then he saw the house.

"It was the home of the Höss family," Glazer says. Rudolf Höss was the commandant at Auschwitz; the house was where he, his wife, Hedwig, and their children lived during World War II, some 50 yards away from one of the crematoriums. "I visited the house and the garden, which is not exactly like it was then. But it still exists. What struck me was the proximity of it to the camp. And the fact that a man lived there, and brought up his family there ..." Glazer pauses, still shaken. "How black a soul must be."

The Zone of Interest, Glazer's attempt to capture the horror of the Holocaust from the viewpoint of Höss and his wife – played by *Babylon Berlin*'s Christian Friedel and *Anatomy of a Fall*'s Sandra Hüller – spends most of its running time inside that quaint domicile, following the daily routines of its occupants as they throw birthday parties, tend to the blossoming flowers, and chat with their neighbors. (The filmmaker shot the movie using up to 10 cameras at a time, in an attempt to capture that insular world from a variety of angles, and only used natural light so as not to employ "the empowering language of cinema" for these characters.) Meanwhile, mass extermination is happening right outside their literal backyard. To them, all the screaming, the gunshots, and the sight of billowing black smoke is simply their everyday environment.

It's the most chilling imagining of the unimaginable in recent memory, made all the more horrific by the fact that, like the 2014 Martin Amis novel that Glazer's film borrows its title from (the phrase refers to the perimeter around Auschwitz where the camp's administrators lived), it forces viewers to experience the camps from the pitiless viewpoint of one of their administrators.

That aspect was one of the few things Glazer knew he wanted to do when he first started thinking about making a film about the Holocaust, a subject of fascination that he attributes to seeing photos of Kristallnacht and the camps in a magazine when he was a boy. "I remember thinking that they were real people in these images," he recalls. "They looked like my relatives. They looked like me."

Yet when Glazer began to seriously consider how he might try to render genocide onscreen, he looked at "the darkening world around us, and I had a feeling I had to do something about our similarities to the perpetrators rather than the victims. When you say, 'They were monsters,' you're also saying, 'That could never be us.' Which is a dangerous mindset."

"When you say, 'They were monsters,' you're also saying, 'That could never be us.' Which is a dangerous mindset."

A GAZE INTO THE ABYSS Above: A scene of the Höss-family home next to Auschwitz in *The Zone of Interest*. Left: Glazer

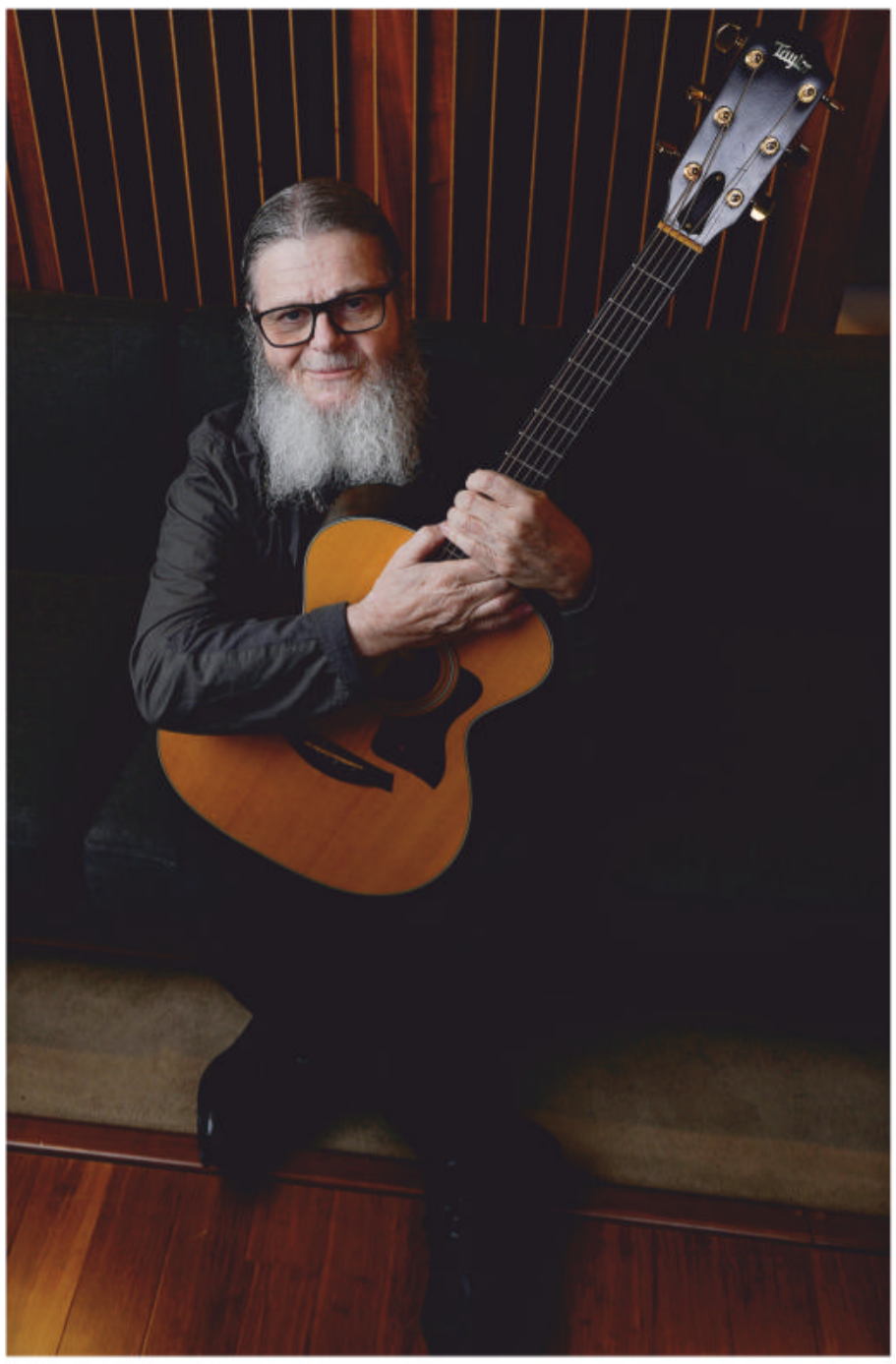
He'd already been contemplating an uncomfortably subjective way of looking at this historical act of barbarity when he read a preview of Amis' book in a newspaper. Yet he didn't want to simply adapt the book. His research suggested that the author's fictional commandant was based on Höss. Piecing together "three lines, two words, a paragraph, whatever" he found in reference to the Höss family, he began to see they were "nonthinking, bourgeois, aspirational-careerist horrors" who'd normalized evil. Once Glazer saw the house, he felt like years and years of researching the subject had led him to that place. He had his starting point.

The result is something that not only details the banality behind the banality of evil, but also looks at the Holocaust in a way that rejects the imagery usually associated with such movies. "We've become desensitized to them," Glazer notes. "It's impossible to show what happened inside those walls. And in my opinion, one shouldn't try." (There is only one scene that takes place within Auschwitz, and the camera stays on a close-up of Höss' face.) Instead, the film uses suggestion and sound – what Glazer refers to as "ambient genocide" – to conjure up how human beings could look upon the methodical killing of other human beings as background noise in their lives rather than a profound tragedy. It's a gaze into the abyss that borrows from paintings, literature, and avant-garde music, yet the movie is anything but stylized.

"Fuck aesthetics," Glazer says. "It was always: 'What's the feeling I'm chasing? How do we represent something that's not representative?' I'm interested in what we can't see. I made this movie out of anger. I wasn't interested in making a museum piece. I didn't want people to have the safe distance of the past and walk away untroubled by what they see. I wanted to say 'No, no, no' – we should be left feeling deeply unsafe about this kind of primordial horror that is underneath everything.

"I was determined to make it not about then, but about now," he adds, quietly. "Because this movie is a warning." ®

A24, HUBERT BOESL/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES



The Magic of Gustavo Santaolalla

The Argentine musician looks back on a career full of game-changing Latin-rock albums, film scores, and more

By JULYSSA LOPEZ

THE ARGENTINE composer Gustavo Santaolalla saw his future 20 years ago.

Back then, he was working on Surco, a label he co-founded that featured acts like Molotov and Juanes. One day, as a gift, a colleague bought him a visit to a psychic – a man whom Yoko Ono and John Lennon had supposedly frequented. The man mumbled and went off on long tangents, but before the session was over, Santaolalla asked about a few Latin Grammys that the label was up for.

The psychic paused. "You're going to win two Academy Awards," he said.

That seemed ludicrous. Sure, Santaolalla had ventured into a few film projects around then: His stunning album *Ronroco* – an experiment with the Andean stringed instrument of the same name – had caught the attention of directors like Michael Mann and Alejandro González Iñárritu, who would become a lifelong friend and collaborator. Still, an Oscar?

Santaolalla went home that day and had a laugh about the visit with his wife. But he thought about the moment years later, when the music he composed for *Brokeback Mountain* won him the 2006 Oscar for Best Original Score – and again in 2007, when he received the same award for *Babel*.

Santaolalla visited the psychic after winning. The man told him simply, "I saw your face in between those two trophies."

Perhaps the psychic also saw that one afternoon in November 2023, Santaolalla would be ensconced in a small corner at his favorite restaurant in Seville, Spain, recounting his journey with his famous white beard cascading down his chest. The night before, he'd been honored with the Latin Grammys Trustees Award for his tremendous contributions to the Latin music industry and a career that has crisscrossed genres, media, and decades.

It started in Buenos Aires, where Santaolalla co-founded the seminal rock-nacional bands Arco Iris and Soluna, which pushed against the Argentine dictatorship of the Seventies. After landing in jail several times, he relocated to Los Angeles, where he also worked as a producer – his credits include Café Tacuba's *Re*, considered the best Latin-rock album of all time. He started a label and became a renowned composer.

Perhaps few have shaped modern Latin culture as much as Santaolalla, but he remains committed to moments of truth and honesty. "I hope that my music and my art always have that quality which touches the heart," he says.

Ronroco

I started playing charango when I was in my teen years, and the ronroco, I discovered it one day at a store. I was called to produce a compilation by Jaime Torres. I wanted to show him a few recordings I'd made on the ronroco. He said, "You found the spirit of the instrument."

Amores Perros

I didn't know Alejandro [Iñárritu] – it was his first film. I told my assistant, "Call and say that I'm not going to be able to work on this. I'm too busy." In the middle of the night, I woke up and I started thinking, "What if this guy is a genius, and I didn't even read the script?" So, Alejandro came in and played the tape for *Amores Perros*. The first 10 minutes in, I was like, "We are doing this."

Brokeback Mountain

I went with a ronroco to the meeting [with Ang Lee], and without saying much, I just played for him. In a month, I sent all the music. I get a call from the producer, and he said, "Man, Ang thought you were sending prior stuff to show what you could do." And I said, "No, this is the music." He said, "I'll see you at the Oscars."

The Last of Us

After the second Oscar, some video-game companies came to me. I met [game co-creator] Neil Druckmann. As I gave him music, it would inspire him to write parts of the game. There was an attempt at a film adaptation, but it went badly. They tried to add heavy-metal guitars to the theme. We were both happy that HBO wanted to conserve the music from the game.

Pan's Labyrinth: The Musical

I'm working on a *Pan's Labyrinth* musical with Paul Williams, and of course, Guillermo del Toro is involved. I always wanted to do a musical. Del Toro told me, "We've been wanting to do this." [He mentioned] David Bowie and Peter Gabriel, but he said, "You'd be perfect."

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: CHRIS PIZZELLO/INVISION/AP IMAGES; FOCUS FEATURES; LIANE HENTSCHER/HBO; WARNER BROS. PICTURES; RODRIGO PRIETO/LIONSGATE

DANCE ALL NIGHT "I have the tools to make whatever I want," says one developer.

COURTESY OF ALLIANCE STUDIOS LLC

Fortnite's Brave New World

Facebook couldn't sell an all-encompassing metaverse. Now, gamers are building their own

By MILES KLEE

IT'S NIGHTTIME, and you're in a forest of tall trees and glowing mushrooms. There are others with you in this particular clearing, which appears to be lit up by fireflies. Before you can get your bearings, the sparks in the air begin to fade, and a giant screen comes into focus overhead. On it is the Australian singer and producer Tones and I kicking off the title track of her album *Welcome to the Madhouse*. "Welcome to a place you've never been/A place you've always dreamed of/But here nothing's as it seems," the song continues as you and your companions fly to a trippy, haunted-looking mansion with rave lights and impossible staircases like something out of M.C. Escher. The party is on.

Oh, and by the way, you're in *Fortnite*.

The franchise, released by Epic Games in 2017, is known for its Battle Royale platform, which pits 100 competitors against one another in a shoot'em-up melee on a vibrant island teeming with fanciful weapons, vehicles, and gadgets. At the height of the pandemic, the entire planet seemed to be playing. Yet the company now seeks to establish a thriving metaverse like you've never seen before – and is banking on the gamers who made *Fortnite* a hit to make that happen.

Since 2018, Epic has offered *Fortnite* Creative, a sandbox-style mode that allows users to build their own playable maps. But it wasn't until last March that it took major steps toward supercharging this user-generated content, or UGC, announcing a new revenue-sharing model, pledging 40 percent of the game's net revenue –

+ GAMING TAKEOVER

estimated to be in the billions annually – to people publishing their own games on the platform. (As of October, it's paid out $120 million to these creators.) The company simultaneously unveiled Unreal Editor for *Fortnite* (UEFN), an application comprising a set of tools from Unreal Engine, the 3D-graphics framework used to develop *Fortnite* and previous hit games (and by Hollywood studios to create shows like *The Mandalorian*).

Thanks to these tools, it's not just mini games these new developers are creating – it's an entire interactive network. That's why, even after the notorious collapse of Mark Zuckerberg's proposed metaverse, Epic and its growing army of designers see themselves as collaborating on a distinct and promising successor, one that sprawls out organically. This time, it's the citizens within a digital nation who get to run the show.

"Facebook has a ton of users, but they're not gamers," says Chad Mustard, a 40-year-old father of four who made the leap from *Fortnite* Creative to UEFN, and uploads much of his content to a YouTube channel, Mustard Plays, where he has more than 800,000 followers. Mustard got into the scene through family ties – his brother, Donald Mustard, was *Fortnite*'s chief creative officer at Epic until his retirement last September – but is thrilled about the notion of a snowballing, all-connected virtual world. "The only way a metaverse could ever exist is with user-generated content," he contends. "Epic has taken their player base and said, 'OK, we're gonna unleash your creativity.' "

Mackenzie Jackson, 31, never imagined herself as

SQUID GAMES Epic has taken its player base and said, "OK, we're gonna unleash your creativity," says one designer and YouTuber.

a developer. "I was just a gamer," she says. She and her brothers were always on the lookout for free titles, which drew them to *Fortnite*. But it was *Fortnite* Creative that really caught her attention. "That, for me, was eye-opening," Jackson says. "I have the tools to make whatever I want."

At first, Jackson saw it as a hobby, but in 2019, Epic asked if she wanted to help craft one of the *Fortnite* Welcome Hubs, portals where creators would be able to access their own games and those built by others. Jackson flew to Epic's headquarters in Cary, North Carolina, where she met another creator, Simon Bell; that same year, the pair collaborated with esports brand 100 Thieves and sponsors including Uber Eats and Rocket Mortgage to launch the "first-ever commercial experience" in *Fortnite*.

That's when they saw the potential for a full-time business, founding Alliance Studios, one of the premier consultancy groups for clients looking to break into the *Fortnite* ecosystem – all the while building experiences like the Tones and I concert.

The 2023 UEFN upgrade, according to Saxs Persson, executive vice president at Epic, came out of the "critical mass" of user ingenuity and advanced tech. He tells ROLLING STONE that the company was pleasantly surprised by how it took off; 300 to 400 new "Islands" – Epic's term for individual games – are published every day.

User-generated content has taken off: 300 to 400 "Islands" – Epic's term for individual games – are published every day.

Jeremy Pedron, known online as "Squatingdog," is among the prolific developers behind that boom. Having amassed a following by putting out a *Fortnite* companion app, he has a built-in audience for his maps, including "Fortnopoly," a bare-bones colosseum environment that he fleshed out with Monopoly-style twists, and "Nope," a deathrun game where players speed through a bedeviling array of killer traps.

One of Pedron's most viral 2023 creations was a "Barbenheimer" map inspired by the concurrent summer theatrical run of the movies *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*. It was an exercise in trying to bring outsiders with a view of *Fortnite* as nothing more than continuous combat into a future of limitless alternatives. "So when you're asking the question, 'I don't want to play Battle Royale anymore' – well, there'll be *Fortnite* racing. There'll be *Fortnite* Lego, there'll be *Fortnite* music."

"The metaverse is always going to be in gaming," says Josh Benzing, CEO of 404 Creative, another bootstrapped company of *Fortnite* creators without much background in game design. "That's where you need to be."

Benzing notes that with UEFN, his budding industry has gotten more competitive, with big-name influencers hiring devs to make them maps. "All of a sudden, they're performing better than even studios like ours," he says. (Persson says Epic, which pays creators according to how well their games attract and retain players, doesn't view this arrangement as a "zero-sum game," because everyone is "pulling in the same direction.")

Despite any growing pains, Benzing sounds bullish, in part because celebrities flocking to the platform may indicate that it's viable in the long term. "A lot of artists are creating their own independent experience," he says. Snoop Dogg and his son Cordell Broadus, Benzing notes, recently launched Death Row Games to help diverse creators publish their work in *Fortnite*, opening yet another talent pool.

"It's truly a new pioneership of what the players want," Pedron says. "But also, what can we create that players don't know they want yet?"

D & D'S STREAMING COMEBACK

Thanks to streaming platforms — and a huge contingent of viewers who yearn for the days of pen-and-paper gaming — tabletop games like Dungeons & Dragons are more popular than ever. Without the aid of flashy visuals, "Actual Plays" — live shows featuring full casts improvising with the roll of the dice to craft expansive stories in real time — span genre mainstays, official extensions, and even homebrew titles. It's one of the most unexpectedly engrossing ways to lose yourself online. Here, some of the top crews to watch.

Critical Role

The reigning kings of Actual Play, *Critical Role* began as a group of friends and veteran voice actors, including Matthew Mercer, Ashley Johnson, and Laura Bailey, just picking up their weekend ritual for a live audience on Twitch. Now, they're a multimedia empire with thousands of hours across three campaigns, an animated adaptation on Prime Video, and even their own tabletop games, including horror RPG Candela Obscura, hitting shelves. A well-oiled machine, *Critical Role* makes for the perfect entryway for newcomers.

Dimension 20

Dimension 20 has a sprawling cast of diverse players and guest stars from across the BIPOC and LGBTQ communities. With a slew of recorded and live series led by a group of improv comics including Brennan Lee Mulligan and Rashawn Nadine Scott, their shows are equal parts raucous and emotionally affecting. Airing on Dropout (formerly College Humor), many of their stories focus on coming-of-age tales and intense character growth. They also do incredible, copyright-safe adaptations of well-worn stories like *The Lord of the Rings*.

Critical Role

World of Darkness

This crew's first campaign, *L.A. by Night* — one of the first Actual Plays to deviate from D&D — helped establish a darker vein of tabletop play, set in the World of Darkness universe using the ruleset of 2015's *Vampire: The Masquerade 5th Edition*. Hosted by game designer Jason Carl — the ringleader of the entire franchise — it ties together the ever-expanding world that now includes successors *N.Y. by Night* and *Seattle by Night*. Whereas other Actual Play groups build their own personal narratives using games, these series are produced in coordination with the game's publisher, making the improvised live-play journeys canonical to the overarching story — from novels to video games.

CHRISTOPHER CRUZ

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF 404 CREATIVE; ROBYN VON SWANK

ALL CHARGED UP Purnell as Lucy, who leaves her cushy world to help rebuild America

Fallout's New Chapter Is Dystopian Prestige TV

The popular video game is set to be the next big-ticket show – if it can overcome its open-world challenges

By CHRISTOPHER CRUZ

"WAR. WAR NEVER changes." It's a grim warning, which leads the introductory monologue to every mainline game in the *Fallout* franchise. It's a real mood-setter, usually accompanied by a summary of the state of society: In an alternative future, the world is living in retro-futurist, atompunk bliss. That is, until the bombs drop. And so, 200 years after the end of everything, the story begins.

The first *Fallout* game launched for home computers in 1997, introducing players to a nuclear hellscape where they take on the role of a Vault Dweller – people who, fortunately or not, have survived generations underground. The game presents a world filled with irradiated monsters, mutated ghouls, and warring factions driven by political or religious zealotry. It's grown with the times – 2008's *Fallout 3* morphed the series from a point-and-click RPG to an open-world journey, and now, it's about to change again, with a Prime Video adaptation from the creators of HBO's *Westworld*, Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy.

Nolan, who co-wrote 2008's *The Dark Night* with his brother Christopher Nolan, helped kick off the "latter-day comic book golden age on film," as he describes it. It was around then he first discovered the cinematic potential for video games, particularly *Fallout 3*. "I played more of that game than I care to admit," Nolan says. "If *The Dark Knight Rises* took an extra year, it may have had to do with *Fallout 3*."

Alongside showrunners Geneva Robertson-Dworet and Graham Wagner, Nolan sought to overcome major challenges, namely balancing the game's elegiac tone without losing its quirky spirit and, especially, consolidating a player's choice-driven experience into something linear.

"You have some storylines, but the world is the opposite of on-rails," he says. "And bringing that scope to the audience? [That kind of] freedom's impossible. There's nothing more on-rails than prestige television."

The solution is what Nolan calls the "classic HBO mold of an omnibus ensemble," following three characters. The story begins with a Vault Dweller named Lucy (Ella Purnell), who, forced to leave a cushy subterranean life, will cross paths with Maximus (Aaron Moten), whom Nolan describes as a squire in a "quasi-militaristic, quasi-religious organization dedicated to limiting the spread of technology." Rounding out the trio is the Ghoul, a near-immortal, disfigured gunslinger, played by Walton Goggins. His journey will take viewers through multiple eras, from the pre-nuclear apocalypse to the series' present, charting his path from a normal life in 2077 to becoming an irradiated Man in Black two centuries later. The show will hinge on the juxtaposition of these characters' worldviews. "We have a knight in shining armor, a zombie cowboy, and a quirky suburbanite," says Wagner. "[They] don't have much of a shared sense of history, or even a shared sense of reality."

That lack of shared reality sadly parallels much of the cultural division in our own world, and will boil up through Lucy's experience. "[There's] so much resonance to this story of this privileged young lady who comes from a luxury fallout shelter and has spent her entire life – and the lives of the previous nine generations – with this almost messianic fervor about returning to the earth and rebuilding America," says Nolan. "And this total ignorance to all the people they left behind and left to rot up above. It's pretty great material for satire."

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: PRIME VIDEO; COURTESY OF AKAGI_A; PRIME VIDEO, 2; SQUARE ENIX; SEGA; BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT

A STREAMER'S GUIDE: 2024'S BEST GAMES

Singer and VTuber Ironmouse has gained nearly 2 million Twitch followers as a perky, anime-esque demon queen. Here, her most-anticipated games of the year.

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH
This franchise, known for reimagining the fate of its most-popular characters, has fans ravenous for information: "I'm just really excited to see where they take the story."

LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH
A bizarre blend of RPG, mini games, and life simulation, Sega's cult series offers "a lot of drama, but the comedic moments really sell it."

TEKKEN 8
Following *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*, this is the latest legacy fighting game to get an update: "Seeing these classic franchises come back? I'm excited."

Q&A

Quinta Brunson

The creator and star of 'Abbott Elementary' talks Emmys, mental health, and the meaning of success

By CT JONES

FOR QUINTA BRUNSON, the end of the months-long SAG-AFTRA strike doesn't mean a return to the familiar. Instead, it's a chance for the Emmy Award-winning writer, producer, and actress to join her same set with a brand-new view on life, hard work, and stability.

The creator of ABC's hit sitcom *Abbott Elementary,* Brunson has experienced a meteoric rise in Hollywood that many Tinseltown hopefuls could only dream of. After a number of viral video series including *The Girl Who Has Never Been on a Nice Date* landed her a production deal at BuzzFeed, Brunson leveraged her internet experience and sharp comedic timing into two network pilots. But they never aired. So Brunson turned to her hometown of Philadelphia, taking inspiration from her mother's longtime career as a teacher, and *Abbott Elementary* was born. For Brunson, the work hasn't slowed since.

"The most hectic a day could get is while we're filming, writing, and airing," Brunson explains, rattling off a daunting day of production as easily as she spells her name. "And then there's an event after work, so I have hair and makeup for that, and then the event, and then I get home and go to sleep and have to start it all over."

It's an intimidating process on its own, one made more exhausting by the fact that Brunson wrote *Abbott* while most of America was lost in a cycle of fear and lack of work during the pandemic. When the WGA and SAG strikes hit, the writer best celebrated for almost single-handedly reviving the network sitcom had to do something much harder: learn how to take care of herself.

Brunson sat in her house. She didn't write. She didn't create. She got a therapist. And now, after almost six months of a Hollywood shutdown, she's returning to the upcoming award season and a filming schedule with a renewed desire to stay present and say no.

The third season of *Abbott Elementary,* which returns to ABC on Feb. 7, puts Brunson in an unknown class – no longer a newcomer, she's an established success story ready to take on a comedy category filled to the brim with hourlong dramedies.

For Brunson, this new era will also answer questions about the trajectory of her career. While *Abbott*'s a hit, TV shows don't last forever. And for the one that she refers to as "her baby," Brunson's next battle might be recognizing when it's grown up.

"If this season feels good to me by the time we finish, I think that it'll show me whether or not it can go on without me," Brunson says. "But I want to be with the show as long as it's on the air. I'm thinking about other things, but not more than I'm thinking about *Abbott*."

You didn't just have the SAG strike, you also had the WGA strike. What did that look like for you?

I'm used to working. And when it comes to what I do for a living, it's really hard not to work. It's kind of being like, "Hey, don't be creative until we solve these issues." That's tough. So after adjusting to that, I used it as a period to get my mental and physical health together. Because I realized that that was something I wasn't focused on while we were making *Abbott*. From the first season to the second season, it felt like one huge period of time that I didn't really have rest. So I had to start treating the strikes as my opportunity to have a pause. I was able to move my head from up out of the ground and be like, "Oh, my God, so much has changed." I kind of had to catch up to where I was now.

To be transparent, I started actually thinking about my mental health and feeling that a therapist was necessary. That was something I was really proud of, because I don't think I would have gotten the time to think to do that if I had gone straight into another season of *Abbott*.

It's incredibly surprising to hear that you didn't have a therapist before because that makes everything you were handling so much more impressive.

That was another thing I learned for myself. I was like, "Stop being impressive. Stop." Us [Black women] being impressive comes with a lot of weight. And it's this invisible weight. We are so good at showing up and looking fine, and you will not know – and maybe we won't even know – that the world is on fire behind us.

This year, I really want to focus on not taking on as much, so that I give myself more time to check in emotionally. On my show, I love to go to every edit, every sound mix, every single session. But I have to start telling myself, "No, you're not gonna go to that sound mix. You're gonna go home and you're gonna rest." Because in rest is when you do find the time to think, and grieve, and love yourself.

What does it look like for you to let that pressure go and also still care so wholeheartedly about making sure everything across the show is aligning?

It's scary because *Abbott* in particular is just so much of my DNA. I feel so spiritually connected to it. So it's really hard when I say I want to pull back in some areas, because I feel like if I'm not there, then something will be different. But I can't think of it that way. My team across the board – writers, production, everyone on *Abbott* – is so incredible. I have to trust the trust I have in them.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN DOPERALSKI FOR "VARIETY"

Being surrounded by so many kids all day, both as a producer and as a character who is a teacher, what are your thoughts on motherhood? And have they evolved at all?

There was a time where I was like, "Oh, yeah, I definitely want to be pregnant and have a baby. I can't wait." But then I started really thinking that when I become a mother, I'm gonna go balls to the wall. Because that'll be the greatest creation I could ever make, and I will focus my attention on that baby 100 percent. So that makes me think motherhood won't be in the picture for me for a while because I don't know if I have the time that I'd like to dedicate to a child. I also don't think I'm ready to sacrifice that much of my time to another human being.

Does it ever frustrate you being so successful that people assume you're representative of all Black women, or all Black comedians?

I don't feel like I get it as much as others, and that's on purpose. I didn't really want to be responsible for an entire race and an entire sex. It's just not my M.O. I don't feel strong enough to carry that. I don't think it's for any of us [to carry].

A weird moment for me was when I was nominated for Emmys last year. The headline became, "The first Black woman to be nominated for three [Comedy] Emmys" in one year. I didn't really know it until I saw the headline and was like, "That's crazy. That's cool." But that became the main narrative. Which once again, still cool, still proud of that. But it's just interesting how no matter what, we have to carry these things. Then, when you get in interviews, I'm [like], "Fuck, let me just get my shit together." I need to be prepared to talk about Black history at any moment. I didn't have that prepared today. I just wanted to talk about my cat and my show. I didn't sign up to be the Sojourner Truth [of sitcoms].

Did this rapid rise to fame change your approach to relationships?

Fame is so nebulous now because there's so many different ways to be famous. I am a very friendly person. I love talking to people. But I do naturally have to be a bit more cautious about my space because I have to acknowledge something that is heightened these days, which is parasocial relationships. And the relationships people can form with you overtaking the actual relationship they can have with you.

I have people I've become great friends with, who I have met after the quote-unquote fame. And those have been wonderful relationships because as I've been on this journey, things have changed in my life that old friends from back home or friends who aren't doing the same things can't necessarily relate to. So it's been wonderful to find really positive new relationships.

And people love seeing friends who you then get to have on projects. I'm thinking of how folks reacted on TikTok to a clip of you and Ayo Edebiri at a Beyoncé concert meeting Zendaya.

People are like, "Ayo [Edebiri] and Quinta became friends through *Abbott*!" But we've known each other for eight years. And now we're just at this place where we're fortunate enough to get to work with each other on our projects. Ayo's a special case because it's really unique for your friend to go through something similar at the same time, and being able to help each other through these things and hit each other up. Like, "Are you going to this event?" "Did this weird thing happen with you?" "What do you do when this happens?"

It's just such a fun relationship to have with someone who already was my friend, someone who is another Black woman in this industry. Because there's so many fascinating times where you could gaslight yourself out of something. And then you talk to other Black girls and it's like, "Oh, OK." That's kind of another thing I'm so grateful to have her for, and know I can talk to her on a very, very direct, basic level. Ayo's practically family. We always have to tell people we were friends before sisters onscreen.

Brunson (center) and crew go for the gold on *Abbott*.

"It's weird how I was like, 'I'll probably live in apartments for the rest of my life,'" Brunson says. "I never thought I'd have a house. Isn't that crazy?"

I'm really curious: Has your definition of success changed at all?

When I first started working at BuzzFeed, I felt successful. I was like, "Oh, my God, I have a job. I get to be creative." At the time, I was making more money than I ever thought I would make in my life. I think for me goals and success are really different. I don't feel as though I'm chasing success. So this is beyond success – to have a show that people love. To have a house, even.

It's weird how I was like, "I'll probably live in apartments for the rest of my life." I never thought I'd have a house. Isn't that crazy? But I will always have goals that will push me to another place creatively, because goals make me feel like life is worth living. But overall, I feel extremely successful. I feel like I am not only my ancestors' wildest dreams but also *my* wildest dreams. Little-kid me is like, "Girl, that's crazy. You're friends with Amy Poehler. That's insane."

How does it feel going from such a stagnant time during the strike directly back into not only a new season of *Abbott* but the upcoming Emmys?

It's still so exciting. It's still an honor. During the time off, I had time to understand what happened during a lot of the award season last year. We were filming *Abbott* during the award season last year, so we're at these award shows like, "We gotta be up at five tomorrow." I'm in notes, I'm in emails while the show's going on.

Sometimes I can find certain things to focus on, and for me during the last cycle, it was Sheryl [Lee Ralph] winning that really stuck with me more than anything. But then I had the time off to be like, "Wow!" For a first season on a network show, we were nominated for seven Emmys with a predominantly Black cast and an actual comedy in a world where the rest of our category is basically dramas.

You've got to bring Little Quinta to the Emmys with you.

That's a good suggestion, that's so smart. She pops out sometimes and those are such magical moments for me. Like, one time I saw James Earl Jones – I didn't talk to him or anything – but the little kid in me jumped out. I wanted to be a crazy child again. And those are moments that really keep you going. So I will be bringing my little self to the Emmys.

As a writer, you don't just have one idea and say, "That's good for the rest of my life." So how often do you think about other projects outside of *Abbott*? Do you ever think you would be able to let the show go on without you?

This third season will be interesting because that'll answer a lot of those questions for me.

TV shows feel like babies, where the first season is an infant, second season is a two-year-old, and in the third season it's like a three-year-old. You know this kid's personality. They have their wants. So if this season feels good to me by the time we finish, I think that it'll show me whether or not it can go on without me. But I want to be with the show as long as it's on the air because I was really intentional about *Abbott,* and I intended to be with it until it was done.

How do you turn all of this pressure and attention into a product you can be proud of? How do you celebrate the wins?

That's what's so fun about going right with *Abbott*. Like a couple of days ago, I had a very rough day. The reality of the world was very apparent and just hit me at every turn. And then I went to work and it was all gone. *Abbott* gets to feel like this bubble where my crew and I have this oasis where we get to create, and it makes us feel like kids again.

That's the feeling I always want to have when I'm creating, whether anyone sees it or not. I want to make sure I look at this thing and I'm proud of it. I care about making the people around me happy, of course, and my family and my friends; and of course I care about making the world laugh. But what's great about zeroing in is that I'm just focused on wanting to make something that I can be proud of. And that helps me celebrate the wins.

GILLES MINGASSON/ABC

RS REPORTS

‘Where We’re Going, We Don’t Need Roads’

Flying cars, air taxis, skyways: The future of local travel is taking flight. But are we ready to leave the land and take to the sky?

By MARC WORTMAN

I SETTLE INTO THE SEAT, check my controls, and lift off.

The aircraft lifts off, not takes off. It’s like a helicopter at first, as the propellers start to spin. But unlike a chopper’s long floppy blades, these props look like an airplane’s but point straight up. Out of the windows, monitors show the Marina, California, airfield and the straw meadows and green hills beyond. It’s early September, and I’m among the first journalists to “pilot” a simulated version of Joby Aviation’s eVTOL, pronounced “ee-vee-toll” – that’s aviation geekspeak for electric vertical takeoff and landing aircraft – an air taxi that runs on batteries, sometimes labeled a flying car, and a completely new type of civilian aircraft that may soon become a way we get around. The simulator is inside a giant white hangar at Joby’s aircraft-assembly and testing facility on a decommissioned Army airbase in Marina.

Outside, Joby’s real electric aircraft waits on the tarmac. It’s one of the new air taxis and flying cars that intend to make terrestrial traffic obsolete over the next 20 years. If all goes according to plan, one of them will glide passengers over Paris this summer. And sometime next year, the first electric-air-taxi services will begin to ramp up in the United States.

Air taxis, industry leaders claim, will take riders for quick trips through the sky – as short as 10 minutes or less and as far as 100 miles or more – leaving traffic below and getting people around more safely than by car at the speed of a small airplane, yet quietly enough to talk with fellow passengers while flying. Air-taxi flights, they insist, will eventually cost no more than an Uber ride. Joby’s founder, JoeBen Bevirt, believes we’re verging on a new era where we’ll begin to park our cars and fly.

“The first step is the air-taxi service,” Bevirt tells me over lunch earlier that day. “But my dream is getting to the time when moving around in the air becomes as commonplace as moving around in automobiles, [and] flight will become part of everyday life.”

If Bevirt’s dream becomes real, the world will change in countless ways. First, think skyways instead of highways. Then there’s the hopscotching people will do about town, rooftop to rooftop, and to places well outside of cities. That means more time for work and play and less time spent getting there. And electric air taxis offer the possibility for people to live where they want, not where their jobs dictate – even if those jobs require coming into the office. Short-distance flying could put outlying areas – Madison to Chicago, Cape Cod to Boston, and where I am on the Monterey Bay to San Francisco – within reach in less time than it takes to drive across most cities today. Live, work, play wherever an electric air taxi flies.

With a potential bonanza in short-distance flight in the offing, an air race is on. More than 200 companies are engineering air taxis and flying cars, though just a handful have flown to date. Joby competitor Archer Aviation

AND AWAY WE GO
In November, a Joby air taxi took flight over New York City.

has already announced its goal to start air-taxi service with its partner United Airlines from Manhattan to New Jersey's Newark airport and from downtown Chicago to O'Hare next year. And urban planners are envisioning a possible aerial future, probably 20 or more years off, when air taxis will fly around metropolitan regions by the thousands per hour, carrying millions of people through the week.

But before all of that, important questions await answers. Small planes and helicopters crash all too frequently. Kobe Bryant died in a helicopter avoiding L.A. traffic. Batteries sometimes overheat and can explode. Fire in the sky? Will we trust that electric air taxis are safe? And even with all of the savings that come with battery-powered flight, getting around by air seems inherently more expensive than by car.

Will this innovation become more than just another way for the rich to distance themselves from the rest of us? Even industry leaders admit: Not at first. Maybe it's never. They may prove too expensive, too dangerous, too high in the air. Aviation history is filled with jaw-dropping machines like the Concorde, the supersonic airliner that promised to shrink the globe, but wound up as a museum piece after around a quarter-century. Could electric air taxis and flying cars become another spectacular, multibillion-dollar aviation-industry flameout?

"My dream is getting to the time when moving around in the air becomes as commonplace as moving around in automobiles."

Soon, we may just have an answer.

THE PROPS lift my simulated eVTOL until it hovers off the ground. With a push on the left power handle, the six articulating propellers tilt forward around the cabin, sending the aircraft forward and up, faster and faster. After a spin over the neighboring hills and dunes along Monterey Bay, I turn back and land. The real Joby eVTOL can fly for about 150 miles at speeds of 200 miles per hour on a single battery charge.

JOBY AVIATION

I can imagine life with Carmel, Santa Cruz, and Silicon Valley within easy reach from where I am – no more need to snake along coastal Highway 1 or white-knuckle it in the 101's traffic crawl. But the flying-car future has been touted and hyped like a meme stock for more than a decade while billions of dollars have poured into the industry – more than $15 billion in 2022 alone, according to consulting firm McKinsey.

Year after year, companies have announced that they're just another year or two away from starting their air-taxi services – with nothing much beyond concepts and brief experimental flights to show for all of that hoopla and cash. And like a meme stock, all of the flying-car hype has led to nasty crashes, some of them real, perhaps most likely contributing to the 2022 closing of Google co-founder Larry Page's Kitty Hawk, one of the earliest companies in the field – its personal flyer kept catching on fire, and it also tended to break down more than it flew, according to press reports. Several other companies have bowed out, too.

That doesn't surprise automotive- and aviation-industry consultant Christopher Hart, who investigated aircraft and other transportation accidents as chair of the National Transportation Safety Board under President Barack Obama. He tells me that there is still "unrealistic optimism about the timing" for the arrival of electric air taxis. He compares the future of eVTOL commercial flight to the for-sure notion that we'd all be hailing driverless taxis by now. "Both concepts are transformative," he says, "but both are far more complex and difficult to implement than is widely known."

The issue is the eVTOL is both helicopter and airplane. Their multiple batteries power motors turning propellers that lift the aircraft into the air like a hummingbird and then fly it like a hawk before landing from a hover. The Marines already fly missions with their Osprey, an aviation fuel-powered VTOL aircraft, and the Harrier jump fighter jet can land vertically. But over the years, each has encountered major mechanical failures, several of them leading to deadly crashes. In fact, Ospreys have gone down more than 10 times, resulting in at least 24 deaths, since the Marine Corps began flying them in 2007.

To make eVTOLs practical, a whole set of technologies had to mature. Most important, fast-charging batteries needed to lose weight yet produce enough energy to drive electric aircraft motors and controls, along with the added weight of the multiple duplicate and even triplicate systems on board that put airliner-level safety within reach. Then there are the challenges in getting an already overburdened FAA and other regulatory agencies to come up with new aircraft specs, safety regulations, and flight-path rules for air taxis populating the sky.

FLY GUY Joby founder JoeBen Bevirt has dreamed of creating a flying vehicle since he was a child — now it's ready for takeoff.

So, the road here has been a long, messy, complicated one. But as these contraptions start to slowly take to the skies and the companies behind them begin to mark real launch dates on the calendar, the skies of *The Jetsons* and *Futurama* don't seem so far off.

This summer, the first paying customer will take German-company Volocopter's single-passenger, 18-propeller eVTOL from Charles de Gaulle Airport to central Paris or from there to Versailles, a tech first timed to go along with the worldwide attention and visitors coming to town for the Olympic Games.

"Why aren't we building cities in the sky? With eVTOLs, we can. The best places I know of are challenging to get to."

Chinese air-taxi companies have been advancing faster even than American and European firms. While some industry observers have raised concerns about the rush to certification, in October, China's equivalent of the FAA certified that eHang's two-seater pilotless electric rideshare, controlled by computer with remote monitoring, can begin ferrying passengers, though there's no word yet in which city it will launch.

Along with the air taxis, people are lining up to be among the first to buy personal flying machines – meaning one without a professional pilot, a type of aircraft the FAA will let any average Joe drive. Silicon Valley's Jetson Aero is building a single-seater eVTOL with eight propellers surrounding the driver. It looks like a mini dirt-track race car and weighs so little that it takes just two or three people to carry it. In videos, the aircraft skims along at 20 feet or so above the ground, banking around tree branches like a jet-ski skimming waves.

Despite the troubling news that has swirled around other personal flyers – like the Kitty Hawks that reportedly kept catching fire – Jetson, which counts will.i.am among its investors, says it sold out its entire planned 2023 production run at $98,000 a pop.

For those who want a true *Futurama* anywhere-to-the-sky flying car, the AeroHT subsidiary of leading Chinese EV automaker XPeng's enclosed, two-seat X2 is rumored to go on sale to the public this year for an estimated $156,000. But that may be lost money for the buyers: All of these personal flying machines are likely to encounter close scrutiny from regulators and local authorities. Whether any of them will pass official muster remains in doubt.

With this new crop of competitors, the big hurdle is creating a sky that suits them. "Why aren't we building cities in the sky?" asks Archer founder and CEO Adam Goldstein. "With eVTOLs, we can. The best places I know of are challenging to get to."

That future will start with trips to major metropolitan airports, where infrastructure is already in place: helipads on which to take off, land, and fast-charge batteries. On a good day, a car ride from Lower Manhattan to JFK takes an hour, but Joby claims its air taxi will need just seven minutes. And Goldstein says United Airlines plans to launch its initial rideshare services with his Midnight air taxis sometime in 2025, taking passengers to and from Newark and O'Hare, which Goldstein has said will cost $150 a ride.

The plan is to expand from there with launching pads on the tops of buildings and parking lots. Once in the air, the speeding eVTOLs will turn the immensity of the sky into low-alti-

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Ian Bates**

tude skyways. Among many other cities around the world readying for the electric-flight future, Dubai is making plans to build vertiports, as the eVTOL taxi stands are called, to enable air taxis to connect four different parts of the city starting the year after next. Eve Air Mobility, founded by the Brazilian jet maker Embraer, projects that 245 of its electric air taxis will be flying over maddeningly congested, mountainous Rio de Janeiro by 2035, carrying 4.5 million passengers every year.

In November, Volocopter and Joby air taxis took turns hovering over the East River as New York City Mayor Eric Adams announced plans for the Downtown Manhattan Heliport to become the first heliport to support electric flight.

"I am really excited about this moment," Adams said, adding confidently, "Within our lifetime, many of you are going to own your own personal electrical helicopter. This is just unbelievable!"

AFTER MY JOBY "test flight," company founder and CEO JoeBen Bevirt and I walk to watch the real thing fly off the Marina airfield. So far, Bevirt sure seems like a contender to be the Orville and Wilbur Wright of the commercial electric-air-taxi industry, and he is perhaps its leading evangelist.

Founded in 2009, Joby is the oldest and, at close to $4 billion, one of the most valuable public companies solely in the eVTOL business. Bevirt says he began dreaming about building a sustainable flying machine as a child. Through interviews and news reports, he's emerged as the industry's most prominent voice. Today, his vision for electric flight stretches to a future where pavement and aircraft-engine exhaust become less and less blights on the planet. He's testified to that effect before Congress. "The existential challenge of our time," he tells me over herbed lamb chops prepared by the company chef, "is building sustainable solutions. This is part of the solution."

Bevirt became the first eVTOL billionaire when Joby, which today has around 1,500 employees, went public in 2021. Today, he's 50 – a good-looking guy, tall and lanky, with sandy-blond hair, a short-cropped, graying beard, and lively, deep-set blue eyes. He almost always wears jeans, even when doing deals with airline and automaker execs and meeting with the state-government and military bigwigs backing his company. He comes across as earnest almost to a fault. He walks fast wherever he goes; every minute counts when his company is burning in excess of $300 million a year. As we speed along through the Marina factory, he doles out fist bumps and hugs to employees and calls out "Woot!" to everyone he encounters.

His longtime friend, Jon Wagner, heads up the design team plus oversees all of the aircraft's electrical systems. He met Bevirt in graduate school at Stanford. They're now working on their second startup engineering firm together. "He is the same person today that he was in graduate school," Wagner tells me when I visit the site he heads up in San Carlos. Before reuniting with Bevirt at Joby in 2017, Wagner was in charge of battery engineering at Tesla for almost five years.

"JoeBen drew me to Joby," Wagner says as we walk around the benches where employees wire electric-motor components. I ask him how Bevirt compares to his old boss at Tesla, Elon Musk. Wagner won't tell me much but points out, "It's a rather obvious comparison. Both are committed to sustainable transportation. They are similar visionaries."

Without needing to say how the notoriously callous Musk differs, Wagner volunteers about Bevirt, "He is a brilliant engineer on a mission, but a compassionate person. He cares about people. After watching him for many years, I can see how successful that is."

IF YOU'VE SEEN one airplane, you've more or less seen them all. Not so with eVTOLs. In fact, no two makers' flying cars or air taxis look much alike, and many have no resemblance to any airplane you've ever flown in. Some carry their propellers overhead, others have props that spin just off the ground. Some have a score or more props smaller than a window fan's spaced around or over their cockpits on origami-like frameworks; others carry all of their propellers on their wings; still others have no wings at all. They can look like space aliens, birdcages, birds, and winged Formula 1 race cars.

Bevirt and I inspect his bullet-shaped aircraft. Big tinted windows cover much of the shiny white fuselage. With gull wings and a forked tail, Joby's looks like a mechanical albatross. Its six hinging props are spaced on two extensions to the front, two on the wingtips, and two attached to the tail. Bevirt opens the door and lowers the folding stairs. I take a seat inside the cabin. The carpeted interior is roomier than my Subaru SUV, with the pilot seated upfront and two rows with two seats each behind that contain plenty of legroom and headroom. There's a compartment for luggage stowage in back.

We walk to the edge of the field to watch it fly. The aircraft rises into the milky-white sky. The six propellers then slowly dip in unison like actors taking a curtain call, and the aircraft transitions, as Joby terms it, into an airplane and quickly flies away. With a helicopter as chaperone, the eVTOL carves widening gyres two miles or more out from the Marina airfield.

When it returns, Bevirt has arranged for the helicopter to fly far off. "Listen," he says. The eVTOL hovers before settling down 200 feet or so away from me. The sound from the blades and motors is nothing like the slasher-movie screech of a drone or a chopper's subwoofer Gatling gun that I might expect. It's quiet, even soothing. I point out to Bevirt that the whoosh reminds me of a big industrial fan. He smiles as he tells me he and his team of engineers tried out scores of blade designs to find the current version. Amid the typical city's 65- to 75-decibel range, nobody would hear the Joby aircraft producing around 45 decibels at 1,600 feet up in the sky. He's convinced the absence of noise will make people on the ground welcome eVTOLs overhead.

But there's something underwhelming about all of it. I realize our sci-fi future won't fly in with a roar and won't look like a jet or an ultra-luxurious limo the way we think of travel in small airplanes and passenger helicopters today. It's more Camry than Escalade. In fact, Joby has partnered with Toyota to develop its future assembly line.

But maybe that's the point. The Joby aircraft is fast but not blindingly so, looks pleasant to ride but not in a way that puts a fat Wall Street bonus on display, and flies along fan-quiet and emissions-free. Those are its selling points. But, Bevirt claims, the ticket price will be, too – one day.

"Our goal," he tells me, "is to be competitive with the cost of ground transportation, but to deliver you to your destination five times faster and with a dramatically better experience." But even if Joby is aiming to become the RAV4 of the sky, that widely affordable flight may take years to get here.

BEVIRT INVITES ME TO HIS home in the Santa Cruz Mountains, on the other side of the range from Silicon Valley. He wants me to understand how much Joby's eVTOL ties into this one particular place. We sit together alongside a pond not far from his handsome but not showy house. Reportedly 440 acres, his property sits amid the towering redwoods, bluffs, and steep cuts overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

He grew up a few miles away. From second grade on, he took a Santa Cruz city bus home from school. After getting dropped off at a corner along Highway 1, he walked up [*Cont. on 76*]

The Flying Cars and Air Taxis That May Fill Skies

No two air taxis look the same — and they operate differently, too. Here's a look at the front-runners in the air race.

AeroHT X2

For those who want a true flying car, the AeroHT subsidiary of Chinese EV automaker XPeng's two-seat X2 is rumored to go on sale to the public soon for about $156,000.

eHang

This two-seater, pilotless electric rideshare, controlled by computer with remote monitoring, was just approved by China's version of the FAA. There's no word yet in which city it will launch, though.

Hexa

Texas-based LIFT Aircraft says it will bring Hexa, an ultralight 18-propeller copter, to NYC for riders to test soon. According to the company, solo riders will be able to pay to take it for a spin.

Wisk

Boeing subsidiary Wisk is banking on people paying to fly in these computer-controlled — meaning they have no pilot at all — air taxis. Wisk hopes to launch pilotless air taxis before 2030.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF XPENG; MAO SIQIAN/XINHUA/GETTY IMAGES; ASAHI SHIMBUN/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF WISK AERO

Gen Z vs. the Gerontocracy

A generation that grew up in a pandemic and under Trump is asking more from our aging politicians – will they listen?

By CASSADY ROSENBLUM

"WE'VE LIVED THROUGH a pandemic. We're living in a climate crisis. We're living through a mental health crisis. We're living in a day and age when school shootings are the norm," Keely Magee, a 21-year-old activist from New Jersey says with frustration. It's a feeling familiar to many of her peers.

I am sitting in the dark cool of the Watergate Hotel, listening to Gen Z describe a childhood filled with lockdown drills and existential dread over a heated world. It is the third and final day of a summit hosted by Voters of Tomorrow, a Gen Z-led organization dedicated to turning out the youth vote and advancing its "Gen Z agenda," policies like abolishing tipped wages and the filibuster in Congress. When I walked into the conference room a few hours earlier, the scene was indistinguishable from a Model U.N. conference: clusters of young people huddled over something called "legislative strategy," Crayola markers sprawled nearby. Born in 2019, out of the sense that older politicians have left their generation high and dry, Voters of Tomorrow has one message: If you want us to vote for you, you're going to first listen.

There's an urgency for the people in this room – they believe the failure of older generations to leave behind a livable future means it is up to them to turn things around before it's too late. Wars raging in Ukraine and the Middle East, a boiling planet, artificial intelligence that may or may not kill us. Ten years younger than me, Gen Z is both alien and familiar. My generation grew up with the Olsen twins and Obama; theirs grew up with Greta Thunberg and Trump. We came of age believing the arc of the moral universe was bending toward justice; they came of age as it was doing a barrel roll.

CLIMATE FIGHT
Despite Biden passing historic legislation to help fend off the climate crisis, young voters want more action.

It's not just Gen Z voters ringing the alarm. Since the war in Gaza broke out in October, hundreds of federal employees, from the State Department to USAID. have signed letters protesting what they see as an antiquated worldview on the Palestinian question, and some have even quit. The loudest voices of dissent have come from young staffers, who have only ever known a right-wing Israel, but as one current Department of the Interior employee put it, that's because young people are more willing to speak out. Behind closed doors, there is a rolling mutiny happening among employees of all

BRYAN ANSELM/REDUX

ages who do not feel their bosses, or representatives, share their same sense of reality.

In at least one crucial way, this is probably true: About half of the country is under 40, but only five percent of Congress is. Americans of all ages don't seem to like this arrangement very much. According to one recent poll, more than 70 percent said there should be age limits for the presidency and Congress. Respondents said they should kick in around age 66, making nearly half of today's senators ineligible.

"You don't need 50 years of wisdom to be able to figure out tax law," Magee quips from the carpet as her companions, in Chucks and Vans, cross-legged in a circle, solemnly nod.

Videos of older politicians stumbling and bumbling have fueled this sense that our democracy has become a gerontocracy, or a government controlled by old people. One week it's Joe Biden tripping at an Air Force graduation, the next it's Mitch McConnell freezing for nearly 20 one-Mississippis. Older politicians have always swatted concerns about competence with an imperious *shoo*. Now, the limits of that dismissive approach are being tested in what could be the most pivotal presidential election in U.S. history

Before 2020, it's unlikely anyone would have paid these youthful grumblings much mind; as the orthodox thinking used to go, the young don't vote. But Gen Z and millennial voters together are expected to equal the boomer-plus electorate for the first time in 2024. In other words, young voters have more leverage than ever, a fact that has not eluded the Democrats: At the Voters of Tomorrow summit, everyone from Rep. Nancy Pelosi to White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre show up.

"It shows a lot of respect," says John Della Volpe, a pollster for Biden's 2020 campaign who now runs the Harvard Youth Poll. "It's the future of the Democratic Party. It's the future of the country. Having studied this for decades and advocating on young people's behalf, I'm just excited that they're being taken seriously."

AGE FACTOR "To see a 77- and 80-year-old man at the top of the ticket seems to me quite incongruent with the needs of the future," says Rep. Dean Phillips.

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

BUT IF PELOSI'S presence shows respect, it also shows fear, which, in politics, may be the same thing.

For the past few years, the polls haven't been looking good for Biden. There was one in 2022 that said 22 percent of Gen Z'ers said they wouldn't vote at all if the choices were Biden and Trump. And now some show Biden locked in a dead heat among 18- to 29-year-old voters in several battleground states – a critical demographic that backed him by a 10-point margin in 2020, helping cinch him the election.

"It feels dire," says 21-year-old Elise Joshi. Joshi helps run the TikTok account Gen-Z for Change, founded by 19-year-old Aidan Kohn-Murphy in 2020 as TikTok for Biden. The name change reflects a commitment to progressive policy over personal loyalty. After Biden won, Kohn-Murphy and his team decided to hold the administration accountable.

"I'm guessing that some politicos are going to try to spin the narrative that young people have always been against Joe Biden because he's old," Kohn-Murphy says. But a closer read, he says, shows young people's support plummeting well into his administration. According to Joshi, Biden's most recent low polls are a direct repudiation of his administration's response to the Israel-Hamas war. "At this point," she says, regarding Gen Z's sympathy for Palestinians, "it's pretty clear it's not a trend. It's a real shift in our mindset across generations."

So far, the White House and the vast majority of Congress have rejected calls for a permanent cease-fire – putting them at odds with the American public, and particularly with young people who are watching content creators their age describe firsthand the horrors of war. Suddenly, astonishingly, the West Bank is an issue that could hurt Biden in the election.

"I'm particularly concerned about Arizona and Pennsylvania," says Supreet Kaur of Seattle. "In 2020, Biden won both states by narrow margins thanks to young voters." Now, she says, "I don't think you can convince them."

Kaur works for Justice Democrats, a PAC that helped get the likes of New York Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman elected. But before that, she worked for Biden's campaign in Nevada, and she's one of the multiple Biden alumni who told ROLLING STONE they will neither work nor vote for Biden again. Instead, she plans to either vote for People's Party candidate Cornel West or not vote at all, a choice some of her peers say amounts to political suicide.

"I wish I could be as morally consistent and strict as I want to be," says Ben Braver, a 21-year-old Gen Z activist. "But there's a candidate who will be better for this country and a candidate who will be worse."

"It'll hurt enthusiasm, which will hurt his chances," he says, referring to Biden's position on Gaza. "But he never won on enthusiasm."

BUT WHAT HAPPENS if we continue to play it safe? Last summer, a paper was published about what happens when AI models lack plentiful supplies of fresh imagery to train on: The model gets stuck in an "autophagous loop," much like an ouroboros. The new images will either spiral into a "boring point," or "bedlam."

Boredom or bedlam is a particularly apt description of our presidential choices in the year 2024. It's as if the entire country, unsure of where it is headed, or confined by certain forces, is doubling back on the past, unable to imagine or create. New IP is too risky; better to run, as they say in the race-car pits, what you brung.

The problem with running what you brung is that the conditions of the track have dramatically changed. This summer, the ocean off the coast of Florida hit an unheard of 101 degrees. In Southern California, the Joshua trees burned, while in Arizona, the saguaros flopped over like fallen soldiers. The first day wildfire smoke from Canada enveloped Manhattan, I watched New Yorkers venture into the hellish sepia cloud and order aperol spritzes, old Covid masks dangling by an ear, accustomed to the "new normal," or dissociated, still, from the last one.

Piercing through it all are the voices of young people. Shae Reinberg, from Wilmington, North Carolina, says her political awakening came when she was 14 and watched a documentary about Thunberg. "The bells have been ringing in my head ever since I took an environmental-science class," she tells me, describing anxiety and depression that accompany her on an "everyday basis." "It made the mundane things, like going to school, seem pointless. Like, what's the point of going to soccer? I should be working on climate."

That sense of dread has defined this generation: A 2021 study surveying 10,000 young people in 10 different countries found that more than half of them believe "humanity is doomed" due to climate change. In the United States, the pessimism is less pronounced at 46 percent, while in the Global South, it is significantly worse: 74 percent of young Indians, 73 percent of young Filipinos, and 67 percent of young Brazilians say they believe we are going off a cliff from which there is no return.

At the Watergate Hotel summit, White House Press Secretary Jean-Pierre takes the stage when, tremulously, Joshi stands up.

"Excuse me for interrupting," Joshi begins as Jean-Pierre waves off a Voters of Tomorrow staff member, trying to do damage control, "but asking nicely hasn't worked out."

Will the administration stop approving new oil and gas projects? Joshi demands to know.

There is a hush over the crowd. Then applause as Jean-Pierre pivots gracefully. "First of all, I appreciate your courage," Jean-Pierre

replies. "[Biden] has taken more action on climate change than any other president."

But for Joshi and many Americans it's not nearly enough.

Perhaps the greatest paradox of the Biden administration has been its position on climate. Yes, Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act, which promises to cut U.S. emissions in half from 2005 levels by 2030; but the administration is also simultaneously pumping more crude oil than any other time in U.S. history, playing what energy analyst Jeremy Symons calls "the greatest shell game in the history of the world."

The new oil and gas won't technically count against Biden's promise because the fuel will be burned elsewhere. But because global warming knows no borders, it is a meaningless distinction. Unless Biden blocks new drilling projects like the Calcasieu Pass 2 off the coast of Louisiana – expected to produce 20 times more greenhouse-gas emissions than the Willow project in Alaska – the United States' emissions in 2030 will be the same as 2005, says Symons.

Slowly but surely, the picture is coming into focus: We must leave the oil and gas in the ground. Young people seem to grasp this reality more readily than older people do – most Gen Z'ers and millennials oppose new offshore oil and gas drilling, polls show, and many think we should phase out fossil fuels altogether.

Boomers, meanwhile, have been much slower to come around, with just a quarter of them saying we should leave behind fossil fuels. Their reluctance could be explained by a lot of things: financial portfolios invested in oil, a nostalgic attachment to cars, worry over higher fuel prices and inflation. But it's also consistent with what we know about age and cognitive flexibility.

"In a rapidly evolving world, older adults can have difficulty switching to something different or thinking outside the box without that past experience to guide behavior," says Mark Mapstone, a neuropsychologist at the University of California, Irvine. "These declines in cognitive flexibility start to show up in the sixties, and are more prevalent in the seventies and beyond, so this is a really big problem for aging politicians who are making important decisions that affect a lot of people."

BUT THE BIOLOGICAL ASPECT of aging is just one piece of the graying picture. For Daniel Stockemer, the Konrad Adenauer research chair in empirical democracy studies at the University of Ontario, the lack of young people in office is a major problem if you accept the radical notion that democracies should look like their populations. "I mean, there is something wrong!" he practically shouts in a French accent, sounding pained. "I see some value in senior politicians, but look – they're losing it! Sorry to say it!"

Stockemer's critique stems from the intuitive idea that we tend to prioritize issues that affect our own group; female legislators are more attentive to issues that affect women, minority legislators are more attuned to issues that affect minorities, etc. James Curry was teaching a class on Congress at the University of Utah around 2014 when a graduate student asked him if the same concept applied to age. "I don't know!" he told him. "Let's find out." Sure enough, together they found that older politicians tend to introduce more bills on geriatric issues, such as continuing education, elder abuse, and nursing-home regulation. Curry emphasizes that this isn't necessarily a bad thing – it's good for older Americans to have advocates in Congress, like the late Sen. Orrin Hatch was for elder constituents in Utah. "But it probably isn't ideal to have so few younger faces on Capitol Hill, in part because we know people are happier with their system of representation when they can see themselves projected back."

At the Voters of Tomorrow summit, I catch up with Chi Ossé, a 25-year-old New York City Council member who would seemingly bear out Curry's hypothesis. In 2022, Ossé rode the energy of the George Floyd protests into office, and was one of 12 council members to vote no on New York City's budget for 2024, arguing that Mayor Eric Adams' true constituents are "corporate interests and the carceral state."

Dressed in a navy-blue suit, or what Ossé calls his "council-member drag," he tells me about how delicate intergenerational relationships can be. "We always say respect your elders, right? I've seen in many cases a lack of respect that elders have for young people." When Ossé was campaigning in Brooklyn in 2021 to represent Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights, he says, he routinely had doors slammed on him on account of his baby face.

After he won, Ossé prioritized issues like affordable housing – top of mind for Gen Z, one-third of whom are still living at home because they can't afford rent. He disrupted a Rent Guidelines Board meeting, helping get a proposed nearly 16 percent hike on rent-stabilized properties with a two-year lease down to 2.75 percent for the first year and 3.2 percent for the second.

It's his peers – Gen Z – who Ossé says motivate him. For Stockemer, this is why having a truly representational polity matters, especially as democracies around the world appear to wobble. "If not the young people who are going to defend democracy – who else?" he asks.

HEALTH WOES
McConnell's repeated recent troubles have been uncomfortable reminders of the infirmities of our leadership and underscore the issue, which one Hill staffer says is even "worse than what people think."

IN AN IDEAL POLITY, we'd have a mixture of young, middle age, and elder decision makers. "It's too simple to say we have a big problem because we have all these old people who aren't doing as well who are in charge," says Alison Gopnik, a professor of psychology at the University of Berkeley. The problem, rather, is the lack of diversity.

The thing is, there is enormous age diversity in our nation's bureaucracy – just very little of it is formalized. The fact that much of Washington runs on youth is neither a secret, nor is it particularly common knowledge.

One current staffer recounts arriving on the Hill at the age of 25 and being shocked to learn several members of Congress rely on "fiefdoms" of twentysomethings to tell them whether to vote yea or nay. (Staffers and former staffers asked to remain anonymous out of fear for their employment.)

The staffers also end up doing a lot of babysitting. One day, walking through the basement of Rayburn House, a massive congressional office building, a Hill staffer I'll call "P" spotted an old man. Noting his cane and "some mobility issues," P says he approached the gentleman to offer assistance when he realized it was Georgia Democratic Rep. David Scott, the 78-year-old chair of the House Committee on Agriculture.

"I tried to communicate with him – didn't register anything," P recalls. "I couldn't find his staff anywhere nearby. So that led me to believe he had wandered away from the office or wherever he was coming from." Alarmed but also in a hurry, P says, he eventually left a visibly confused Scott lost in the tunnels, an account that Scott's office says is "categorically false."

"Like many other members, it is the practice in our office for the congressman to drive between House buildings and the Capitol," a spokesperson replied. "He does not use the tunnels. Furthermore, he is always accompanied by staff to maximize the value of his time, and so would not have been in the position this staffer described."

Many Americans associate this kind of coddling with the late Sen. Diane Feinstein, who allegedly suffered from memory loss in the latter years of her life, and reportedly relied on staff to shield her from the public. "We were taking meetings so people could come into the office and feel like their concerns were being heard, but we weren't actually relaying it to the senator," one former Feinstein staffer tells me.

This widening gulf between the people of California and their elected official bothered this staffer. He had come to Washington full of idealism, and now it was evaporating as he realized who really wielded power in many geriatric offices: the chief of staff. From what he saw on the Hill, these chiefs were always high-

J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP IMAGES

ly deferential to their bosses. Still, the unofficial transfer of power puts a strain on democracy. "These are not the people that you voted for running these offices," he says. "We don't know their names, where they're from, what they stand for."

Worst of all, behind closed doors his colleagues would either groan about their fading superiors or laugh to keep from crying. For him, the most dangerous part of the gerontocracy is not that it exists, but that the people with real knowledge about how serious it is – "worse than what people think" as another staffer characterized it – are too scared or too self-serving to come forward.

It can be hard to talk about age, though. For one, how people age varies greatly. For every McConnell, 81, there is an indefatigable Charles Grassley, 90; for every Biden, a bantam Bernie Sanders, 82. And nobody wants to practice ageism or be accused of it, especially when baby boomers make up a formidable share of the electorate. Consequently, much of the muttered discourse devolves into a "not all old people" cul-de-sac that distracts from a basic fact: Executive function, on average, begins to decline around age 65, according to Mark Fisher.

Fisher is a neurologist with a scholarly interest in political science, and is the director of the new UC Irvine Center for Neuropolitics, which he established, in part, to address the void in the literature about how age affects politics. As a first step, he believes that cognitive testing should be implemented for all political candidates. Testing eliminates the problem of speculation, which most medical professionals and journalists are loath to do ever since the Goldwater Rule established it is wrong to armchair-diagnose politicians. But Fisher admits testing doesn't always solve everything, partially because the results can be presented selectively.

Biden, for example, had two major medical evaluations, in 2021 and 2023, both of which were made available to the public. "These reports are interesting because of what they disclosed," Fisher says. "But they are also interesting for what they don't disclose."

Like the results of Biden's mental-status examination. This portion describes functions like language and memory, and serves "as an overview of the cognitive function," Fisher explains.

"I expect Biden would do fine on the basic mental-status exam described," he speculates, doing the very thing that comprehensive testing is meant to do to avoid. "I don't understand why this was not addressed in the reports."

Also omitted in the 2021 and 2023 reports were Biden's two previous brain surgeries, and his sleep apnea. Biden did disclose the surgeries and apnea in the past, but Fisher thinks they should have also been included in the most recent reports. "I hate to be bashing on Biden, but this is not politics," he says. "This is facts."

The issue of today's gerontocracy is made more complicated still by the fact that the majority aren't just any old people, but the baby boomers. To many readers of this magazine, the boomers are the Woodstock and civil rights generation, the original environmentalists. For Tom Wolfe, they were the original "Me" generation, an impression that Bruce Cannon Gibney shares. Gibney is a venture capitalist and writer known for his 2011 essay "What Happened to the Future," about how we got 140 characters instead of flying cars. In his book *Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America,* he argues that instead of paying down the national debt and investing in future-oriented programs such as the GI Bill, as the Greatest Generation and the early Silents did, boomers have squandered America's vast wealth by transferring it backward to themselves, tripling the national debt as a fraction of GDP since the mid-1970s in the process.

Gibney takes particular aim at Social Security and Medicare, which were never intended to be such massive parts of the government's budget, or a universal cushion throughout seniors' golden years. When Social Security was first introduced in the 1930s, life expectancy was around 65; today it is about 78. Back then, elder poverty was a serious issue; today, 10 percent of Americans over the age of 65 live in poverty compared with 17 percent of Americans under the age of 18. Despite this shifting demographic picture, our spending priorities remain calcified in the past, Gibney argues, decided upon by the same people who stand to benefit from them the most.

The fact that it's taken more than 20 years to address student debt, regardless of the administration or its ideology, suggests long-running generational negligence, says Gibney. "Biden's relief programs are small compared to $1.74 trillion in student debt, and tiny against the Social Security and Medicare shortfalls boomers will demand young people pay for in the 2030s," he tells me. "Younger Americans might feel they're finally on the boomers' radar, but if they are, it's as a target."

One congressional staffer, in fact, recounted working for a representative now in her seventies who didn't seem to understand how expensive college is today. This lack of empathy can be infectious, he says, creating a culture of jadedness. "It's like, well, they don't care. Why would I care? And then the work suffers."

For Gibney, this is the most corrosive part of the gerontocracy, and one he says he's heard far too much in Silicon Valley: "Why try?"

BUT WHAT ABOUT those of us who do still care to try?

"I believe we're sleepwalking through the same thing that happened in 2016," says Rep. Dean Phillips, the only Democrat aside from Marianne Williamson openly playing Cassandra, and challenging Biden for president. His campaign is based on the obvious: "To see a 77- and 80-year-old man at the top of the ticket seems to me quite incongruent with the needs of the future.

"I come from the business world," he says, having introduced American consumers to Belvedere vodka and Talenti gelato before turning his prowess as a salesman on Minnesota voters, flipping its 3rd Congressional District from red to blue in 2018. "And in the business world, you don't create a product and then hope that the market responds to it. Smart people listen to the market." In politics, he points out, it's the opposite: "A small group chooses the product, then tries to convince Americans of its integrity."

"It feels dire," says Elise Joshi, who runs the TikTok account Gen-Z for Change. She and her cohorts feel Biden isn't doing enough on climate and the war in Gaza. "It's clear it's not a trend. It's a real shift in our mindset across generations."

So far, Phillips, 54, is not having much luck convincing voters he's the "generic" Democrat that they would prefer to Biden. He knows one thing though: The solution to the gerontocracy starts with campaign-finance reform. "If you don't start with campaign finance, how can you expect a 25-year-old to raise 5, 10 million at $5 or $5,000 increments?" asks Phillips, whose own personal net worth is reportedly around $100 million. He points out that these barriers don't just keep out the young, but candidates of color, too. "We are supposed to be the most accessible democracy in the world. I'm afraid we're not practicing what we preach."

In uttering the quiet part out loud, Phillips is exposing a truth rarely admitted by politicians about power: Once you get it, you don't let go. The fact that Democrats are as susceptible to its spells as Republicans is a problem in so far as their brand revolves around distinguishing themselves as the moral alternative to MAGA. Ironically, the tighter Biden clings to the White House, the vast, profound differences between him and Trump begin to flicker.

"Is it really a democracy if my vote has to be coerced under the threat of something even worse than over 6,000 dead children in a month?" Kaur asks. "If the only option in every election is increasingly right-wing Democrats because the Republicans are more right wing, then we have to draw the line somewhere. My vote needs to be earned."

MARISSA LESHNOV/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX

THE WORLD BELONGS TO

21 SAVAGE

He became your favorite rapper's favorite rapper while overcoming all manner of turbulence. We ride along as Savage heads to Europe and starts a new chapter in one of hip-hop's most unique stories

BY MANKAPRR CONTEH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THIBAUT GREVET

Larry
GANG

Jamika
Johnny
Darryl

MACK IN THE CENTER of Paris' Trocadéro esplanade stands 21 Savage, face-to-face with the Eiffel Tower for the first time. It glows in the distance, across the Seine river, as a light rain falls and dusk settles around us. He's flanked by four security guards, all dressed in black like Savage, whose eyes peer out of a slick ski mask and North Face hood.

Savage's team giddily snaps pictures while he looks on, surrounded by a bustle of tourists. A salesman sets down the light-up Eiffel Tower toys he was peddling and volunteers to take group photos of Savage's entourage, which includes Buwop (née Kenya), Savage's right-hand woman and friend of nearly a decade, and Meezy, his manager. When Buwop wants a solo shot, the salesman gives her tips on how to pose in front of the tower like she's pinching it from above. "Oh, he know what he doing!" Meezy says.

At some point, as his friends enjoy the scene, Savage slips away, back into the luxury black SUV that took us here. He's taking it in quietly, but this visit to Paris is a pivotal new chapter in one of hip-hop's most unique stories. Savage is back to Europe for the first time since he was child; until very recently, this was impossible.

Born Shéyaa Bin Abraham-Joseph in London, and raised in Atlanta from the age of seven, Savage, 31, is American by all standards but paperwork. He lived much of his life as an undocumented immigrant; for a while, he couldn't even drive or fly for lack of a government ID. As he made a name for himself as a street rapper with real gangster bona fides and menacing wit, he had to take cheap buses up the coast to label meetings in New York.

But lack of papers didn't keep him from becoming one of the biggest names in rap. The markedly Southern, deadpan, solidly intimidating croak of 21 Savage's voice is unmistakable. Savage used to rap in that same vein-popping squall popular in mid-2010s Atlanta hip-hop. By 2015's *Slaughter King*, though, it cooled into the drawl we know today, while maintaining the kind of flippant audacity you hear on hits like Drake's "Jimmy Cooks" (where Savage starts his verse with "Spin a block twice like it ain't nowhere to park"). "I meant that shit more back then," he says, laughing at his old animation.

Constantly called on by hip-hop's finest – J. Cole, Young Thug, Future, Cardi B – Savage comes off as your favorite rapper's favorite rapper. Drake has been a fan going back to 2016, when he crowned Savage "a young October king with all the juice right now" in an Instagram post. Thanks in part to *Her Loss,* his and Drake's 2022 collaborative album, Savage was the sixth most popular artist in the country on Spotify in 2023. He's given back, too, implementing so many community-service initiatives in Atlanta through his Leading by Example foundation that he was honored with his own day in Georgia: Dec. 21.

But his ascent was marred by shocking turbulence: Early on the morning of Super Bowl Sunday 2019, after performing at a Nike party in Atlanta, Savage was driving Meezy's Challenger when he saw flashing blue lights and guns drawn. He was apprehended on an alleged visa violation in a targeted operation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. " 'We got Savage,' " he recalled hearing. Savage's lawyers contended he was singled out for his star power, as the Trump administration waged a war on immigrants of color.

Savage was jailed for nine days at what one expert called "one of the worst immigration detention centers in the U.S." As he was arrested, he had been preparing to fly from Atlanta to Los Angeles to celebrate the sixth birthday of Kamari, the eldest of his three children. The kids were already there, waiting on him. His mom, Heather Joseph, let them know he wouldn't be making it. Savage thinks he'll explain the whole situation when they're older: "When I was growing up, I didn't know my mama problems and shit," he says. He was jailed during the 2019 Grammys, where he was up for his first two awards – Record of the Year and Best Rap/Sung Performance for work on Post Malone's "Rockstar," which they had been set to perform together. He watched the awards in his room at the detention center.

> Savage says his music is "fiction as hell. Some of it be based off of real life, but a lot of it be creative stories."

Savage and his legal representatives say that after a previous visa expired, he applied for another, in 2017 – a U visa, which grants U.S. residency to crime victims who cooperate in their investigation. Four years prior, Savage survived a gruesome shooting – he took six bullets – that his friend did not, making him potentially eligible. The application was pending when he was arrested. ICE claimed that, in addition to overstaying his visa, Savage was a convicted felon, which his lawyers refuted; he only has a marijuana-possession offense to his name.

Deportation and a 10-year ban from America loomed over him. Celebrities like Kendrick Lamar, SZA, and Post Malone, as well as activists and ordinary citizens, rallied for his freedom and citizenship. "It felt good to know people was fighting for me," Savage says. Civil rights organizations formed the #Free21Savage coalition, issuing public calls to action, rallying elected officials, and releasing a star-filled PSA. A petition for his freedom pointed to the historically underreported harassment and targeting of Black immigrants and garnered half a million signatures.

It would take years to sort through his legal situation. Finally, in October, Savage announced that he had become a permanent U.S. resident with the right to travel internationally and return. Drake himself commemorated the moment with a line on his solo album *For All the Dogs*: "Savage got a green card straight out of the consulate."

The pair celebrated by taking the stage in Toronto on Oct. 7 – Savage's first international show, and the last stop of their It's All a Blur Tour, which Savage had played in every city (excluding Montreal and Vancouver). Savage says he had been in touch with Drake about the progress of his immigration fight: "I used to update him and shit because I wanted to do the Toronto show," he says. But while a quick flight to a neighboring country was special, getting back to his home continent is something else entirely.

Which brings us back to Paris on this drizzly November night. Savage just arrived here to kick off a headlining tour of Europe that culminates in a London homecoming show in a couple of weeks. There are 19 of us moving around Paris together; people Savage considers family. There's Buwop and Buck, friends who grew up near him, and Savage's blood brother Karu, a fresh 21 years old. Then there's 21 Lil Harold, who's opening for Savage on the tour, and TJ, 23, who might as well be his blood brother.

"He's just a genuinely loyal, giving person," says Meezy of Savage, adding that it takes a lot for him to push you away once you're close. "He's going to try his hardest to keep his unit as tight as possible. You got to cross that man. He ain't going to cross you." Meezy, who has been in business with Savage since 2015, had held off on going international, only traveling to London once, on business. "I just told myself I ain't going to travel the world until we can do it together," he says. " 'I ain't going to see nothin' before my brother'-type shit."

Later that evening, I ask Savage what was on his mind while he watched the Eiffel Tower so stoically. "Nothing really," he says plainly. "I was just looking." After a lifetime of only knowing it as a landmark on screens and paper, it'd be a lot to take in for most people, but I'm also reminded of something he told me days before: that he generally prefers thinking to himself to talking out loud.

"It's like you're free when you in your head," he said – free of judgment, free of misinterpretation, free of consequence. That stoic exterior, though, belies a trove of curiosity, a soft heart, and a lifetime of resilience, not to mention one of rap's more-revealing testimonies to the peril and promise of the so-called American dream.

AHEAD OF OUR TRIP TO PARIS, I first meet Savage at Doppler Studios, an Atlanta mainstay where luminaries like Outkast and TLC have recorded. His room looks like it could host at least 100 people, but on this Tuesday night, about 10 folks rotate in and out of it. Meezy is a constant; so is Savage's longtime A&R Jennifer Goicoechea, who says she realized he was a superstar when, at his first solo headline show in 2016, Savage had the Atlanta venue completely blacked out, with blood-curdling screams blasting through it for his entrance.

When I walk in, Savage's face is poking out of a ski mask. He's wearing an olive Nike Tech fleece, with his legs kicked up on the studio's slick, wooden center console, one white Air Force at the bottom of his gray joggers, the other foot in just a sock. He's here finishing up his next solo album, but he's reluctant to divulge details. "We ain't got no mixes back yet," he says when I ask if I can hear a bit of what he's worked

on so far. "He damn near don't even like the fact that we be listening to it, and I'm his manager," Meezy adds. "That's why he said it is not mixed. It might sound small, but it's a really big deal for him."

The seminal producer Metro Boomin, who's worked with Savage over the past decade, helped with the new music, even as they both had other blockbusters on their hands. "I got a studio in L.A.," Metro says. "We would work on the verses for [*Heroes & Villains*, Metro's hit album from last December], and at the same time, I feed him beats when we work on the stuff for his album, and he was working on *Her Loss* in the front room at that time, too."

Savage spends a lot of time in the studio; it's one of two places he tends to find himself. "I just go to the studio, go home," he says. He can't really hang at any Atlanta haunts anymore – he's too famous for that. Does that feel limiting? "Nah, I love being at home. Home is fun to me."

His three children have a low tolerance for their father's fame, he says. "They hate when people try to ask me for pictures," he tells me. "They'll argue with each other: 'Hurry up before they start trying to take pictures with Dad. Let's go.'" Kamari is 10 now, and Savage has two eight-year-olds – a son, Ashaad, and a daughter, Rhian, who wants to be an actress and has already begun taking lessons. All of his kids like sports, and he loves taking them to the trampoline park. He doesn't play or discuss his music with them, he says, and they're not particularly interested in it, either. "My daughter would just be like, 'Make a song about me,'" says Savage. "But other than that, nah."

Though Savage is now free to travel the world, his people remain the center of his. "When I lost my mom, God bless her soul, he came over to my house with my brothers and sisters," Metro says. "Even while I'm over there just crying or whatever in the other room, he over there talking to my grandma for hours. None of that has anything to do with making an album. You feel me? But all that stuff counts."

Savage's schedule switches up often, but lately, in addition to spending time with his kids, it involves riding motorcycles through Atlanta (*Biker Boyz* happens to be his favorite movie), hitting the studio in his premium work hours of 8 p.m. to 1 a.m., then playing *NBA 2K*. He often goads friends like Landstrip Chip, another artist in the studio with us, into playing with him before getting an impressive seven hours of rest ("Hell, yeah, I'm going to get my sleep," Savage says proudly). He says *2K* grounds and relaxes him, as does Spades. He asks me, out of the blue, if I know how to play. "No, I don't," I respond. "Why?"

"So he can take your money. Leave him alone!" Meezy interrupts. "You're going to lose every match."

At Doppler, Savage tells me that his music is "fiction as hell." "I just think of it in my head," he says. "Some of it be based off of real life, but a lot of it be creative stories." All great works of fiction are rooted in reality, though. One of the triumphs of Savage's "A Lot," featuring J. Cole, which won them the Grammy for Best Rap Song in 2020, is the way he boils his lived experiences down to universal truths: *A lot* of people cause harm. *A lot* of people die.

Savage sold hard drugs, he told *Fader* in 2016. He's robbed people, a friend of his told the magazine. Though they'd try to ensure the properties they hit were vacant before clearing them out, "sometimes we had to shoot our way out," the friend said.

He's also suffered deep losses – among them, three brothers. Two were biological kin, both younger than Savage, the eldest of 10 siblings. In Atlanta, his brother Quantivayus "Tayman" Joseph was killed in 2014, reportedly in a botched drug deal, inspiring the dagger tattoo on Savage's face. In London, his brother Terrell Davis-Emmons was stabbed to death in 2020. One brother was chosen family. Known as Johnny B, he was killed on 21 Savage's 21st birthday, Oct. 22, 2013. Savage was with him and got hit six times himself. He thought he might die, too, but managed to call 911 with just one working hand after unsuccessfully knocking on a nearby door.

He only began celebrating his birthday again recently. "I got shot on my birthday, and I got into a car accident with my mama on my other birthday," he tells me. "So I always felt like my birthday was cursed or some shit. I just used to sit in the house on my birthday every year." He now has an annual blowout in Atlanta – Freaknik-themed in the past, and early-2000s-themed this year.

> "I got shot on my birthday, and got into an accident my other birthday. I felt like my birthday was cursed."

Though violence has been a recurring motif in his life, he's also actively denounced it. He's talked to students in an anti-gun program, spoken out against shootings in his vicinity, and tweeted "Atlanta We Have To Do Better Put The F****** Guns Down !!!!!" in 2022 – to which people responded by implying he was being hypocritical, tweeting his lyrics, like "Shot that nigga 20 times, damn, this nigga lucky," back at him. "A Song Is For Entertainment It's Not An Instruction Manual On How To Live Life In Real Life I Give Away A lot Of Money And Spread Financial Literacy To My Community Stop Trying To Make Me 1 Dimensional," he responded.

In a quiet moment in the studio, Chip says, "We got it so good over here," after watching a clip of a rocket being launched; Savage asks if it's from the Israel-Hamas war. I ask Savage what he thinks when he hears sentiments that we're better off, knowing the carnage that has touched him right here in Atlanta.

He can't quite wrap his head around what he's heard about the war. Without naming a side, he says, "I could never be that coldhearted, though. Even the person that just greenlights that – the person who says, 'Yeah, you got to drop a bomb on that shit' – how could you sleep at night knowing you just dropped a bomb on 40 kids?" He's not referring to any particular incident, and like many people, he has a surface understanding of what's happening, though he wants to learn more. He asks about the origins of the conflict and looks up the region's geography on his phone.

When Savage is finally ready to record at Doppler, he slips into the left-most corner of the wide booth, out of sight for most people in the room, and sits on a stool in complete darkness. He can only be heard through the headphones worn by his recording engineer, Isaiah, at the desk. Up to his second album, *I Am > I Was,* Savage would let the whole room hear him, but now he prefers his privacy. "I think back when it started getting more like a job, I got like that," he says.

With Savage in the dark, I can ever so slightly make out his silhouette leaning on the chair, his waist at the edge of its seat. I can see the light on the slim, steely vape that's almost perpetually on his person. When he's rapping – freestyling and punching in, here, he tells me later, though sometimes he writes out lyrics – he sits on the stool and swivels himself gently, his hands ticking slightly. Otherwise, he's still.

Goicoechea, his A&R rep, offers me her headphones to listen in. The beat is easy-listening trap, if you will. He's working out the kind of bars of his I love over it – curt, quippy, unvarnished, and darkly funny. "I got turnt, now I'm the chosen one," he plays with. "I ain't have no car, I stole me one.... Where my opps at? Nigga, show me one."

When I see Savage next, he's done recording, and his face is bundled in his ski mask and fleece hoodie. "She can hear this song," he instructs, much to my surprise, as Isaiah cues it up. Savage hits some catchy singsong-y melodies on it, but naturally, raps about sex, clothes, and get-back, as he is wont to do. He employs coital lore that doing the do has made his partner's butt bigger; he brags on an expensive pair of leather jeans; he warns that the last person who got too big for their britches ended up like a certain friendly ghost. It may sound like standard rap fare, but Savage is gifted at making it leaner, meaner, and more clever.

When I tell Savage I admire his sense of humor, he asks, "If I'm serious, but you think it's funny, *am* I funny?"

IN PARIS, AS WE DRIVE AWAY from the Eiffel Tower in the SUV on stone roads dense with old buildings, Savage remarks that the city doesn't look that different from New York – just wider streets. This, in turn, brings up memories of the tight roads in his first city – London.

His most vivid memories from there are set at his two grandmothers' houses. His mom's mom has passed, but his dad's mom is still alive. The only plan Savage has set for his personal time in London is visiting family, particularly his grandmother, whom he hasn't spoken to in a few years. Savage knows she still lives in Brixton, as he did. "I ain't told her," he tells me. "I'm just going to pop up."

His father's family immigrated to London from Saint Vincent, an island in the Caribbean between Saint Lucia and Grenada. Brixton has historically had a large Afro-Caribbean population, after a rush of immigration in the 1940s and 1950s, and saw race riots over anti-Black policing in the 1980s and 1990s before becoming more gentrified in recent years.

Savage was largely raised without his father, but he's close to his mom, who will return to London with Savage for his show. She's from East London, where Savage spent time as a child as well. Her family is from Dominica, another Caribbean island. "My granddaddy spoke French," Savage tells me, "broken French." When I ask why, Savage pulls up the ugly, exploitative history of French (and English) colonization on his phone, noting that Dominican French Creole became the common language.

His mom and an older cousin taught him a bit about their Dominican culture. "We got indigenous people there, villages and shit. She got a whole documentary on it," he says of his cousin, whom he thinks of like an auntie. His mom's cooking kept them close to Dominica. "It's like Jamaican food," he explains.

Savage says his mother moved him and his siblings to the U.S. in search of a better life. They didn't necessarily find it, and young Shéyaa grew up amid poverty and violence. "I think it was the same shit [as London], really," he says. Savage often raps lovingly about his mom, and I ask him when, as a child, he remembers her being proud of him. He tells me that,

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. PRODUCED BY DIVISION: GWENDOLINE VICTORIA, HEAD OF FASHION FILMS AND CONTENT; ANNE-SOPHIE DUJON, SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER; REDA MADJID, PROJECT MANAGER; MATEO MURGA, LINE PRODUCER; HAIR BY YANN TURCHI FOR BRYANT ARTISTS. MAKEUP BY LINDZY. STYLING BY FATIMA B. FOR MASTERMIND MGMT. TAILOR: GUILLEM RODRIGUEZ. SET DESIGN BY FELIX GESNOUIN FOR TOTAL WORLD. LIGHTING DIRECTOR: HARRY HAWKES. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY KINU KAMURA AND ROMAIN JOUVIE. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: THOMAS PORTEVIN. DIVISION PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: KENZA HASSAN AND EMMANUELLA TETTEH. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY ROUGI. SET DESIGN ASSISTANCE BY PALOMA LARATTE AND GUSTAVE BIRCHLER. UNIT MANAGER: DEJAN TRAJKOV. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY JULIEN FERNANDES.

in the fifth grade, he won a spelling bee; he remembers acing some math competitions, too. She was always happy with him, he says, despite the difficulties.

Shéyaa found his way into illicit money around the sixth grade – selling a little weed – to pay for his own cellphone. Around the same time, at age 12, he made friends with a boy called Skiney, who was killed in 2021, he tells me. Skiney lived below him; they'd rap and make up songs.

Years later, at about 18, Savage came into big money in the streets, and he put it toward studio time. "I had hit a lick for like $80,000," he says. "Me and my partners, we split it four ways. I already had a little money just from hustling, then had an extra $20,000, so I was just trying shit." The name 21 Savage, he has said, represents the 2100, a Decatur gang he was affiliated with; a former propensity for theft and shooting; and the deaths that came with that life.

As Savage put more stock into rapping, he found a manager, Kei Henderson, and sent what would become his breakout song in Atlanta, "Picky," to one of the city's hottest club promoters at the time – Meezy, also from Atlanta's Eastside. "He wasn't really fucking with it," Savage told me at the studio, with Meezy listening in. "He wasn't really responsive like that."

"Don't let him act like he was just a rapper following his dream, man," says Meezy, on light defense. "To me, he wasn't a rapper. He was just a nigga who made a hard song from the street." Soon, though, Meezy became a fan, then co-manager, and in 2019, Savage's sole manager.

Savage's shift out of the streets was gradual. "I never really stopped doing my thing until the music just took off," he says. "It consumed my time, so I didn't have time to do nothing else. I was getting booked. I seen it working. Once I seen it started working, I started just putting more of my all into it."

Savage met Metro Boomin around 2013. "Before we got close, I'd just be like, 'Hey, that's just the nigga that smoke cigarettes and look mean all the time and don't talk,'" Metro says. "He ain't ever seemed that approachable of a person. I mean, he's still like that pretty much." (Metro does say that Savage has softened some with age, success, and parenthood.)

In 2014, Savage approached Metro with a request. "He was like, 'Yo, I'm going to start fuckin' with this rap shit. You send me a couple of beats or something.'" One of them became "Drip," on Savage's first mixtape. It was the start of a very productive friendship. "I always loved making dark and ominous beats," says Metro. "So it was like a match made in heaven, with how cold and eerie the beats I was giving him, on top of how he would rap, the shit he was saying, how crazy it would be. There was still beauty in the beginning of him not being a professional rapper or just knowing everything about rap. That's what made him so different and unique."

They decided to make a collaborative tape. Metro remembers the two of them in a shitty Austin studio during South by Southwest, cranking out *Savage Mode* fan favorites "Bad Guy," "Mad High," and "Ocean Drive" in one sitting. They chipped away at *Savage Mode* for two years before it was released in 2016, setting Savage on the path to stardom.

Seven years and billions of streams later, Savage is at the pinnacle of his career, though not exactly obsessed with the spoils of stardom. The 2024 Grammy nominations were announced while we were in Paris, with Savage racking up a career-high five nods, including Best Rap Album for *Her Loss*. Three days after the nominations were revealed, Meezy tells me he and Savage hadn't discussed them yet.

THE SUV HEADS to Arthur Kar's L'art de L'Automobile, an exclusive club for luxury-car enthusiasts. When I ask who, exactly, Kar is, Savage tells me "he's the man in Paris," calling back to Kar's guest voice-over on "On BS," a *Her Loss* song where Kar flexes against fashion week and flaunts his fast whips. Turns out Kar is also a fashion head and friends with Drake; Savage met him on the It's All a Blur Tour.

On the way over, Savage watches videos on social media. At one point, Drake's "Calling for You," on which Savage is featured, blares from his phone, soundtracking a clip about clothes.

Savage shows Buck and Buwop a meme he finds on Instagram about the pack of orange combs with which many Black folks are familiar, then asks us if we know the real name of an R&B classic that he plays aloud. 21 Savage is a soul connoisseur; there's even an Instagram account dedicated to compiling clips of him singing to himself: songs like "Hrs & Hrs," by Muni Long, and "Promise," by Ciara.

The song Savage quizzes us on is Ginuwine's "Differences." Buwop hits the ad-libs, but is stuck on the name. So is Meezy. After playing *Name That Tune*, Savage sings along to a cover of Joe's "I Wanna Know."

Buwop wonders aloud why men in R&B don't serenade women like they used to. "Y'all bitches some hoes now," Savage retorts with reflexes of a stand-up comic. "Nobody singing to y'all. Everybody sell pussy. Ain't nobody to sing for." We all laugh – me mostly due to his quick delivery and light tone, though attitudes like this can be concerning. Every woman is obviously not a sex worker, but sex work doesn't make one unworthy of love. As ordinary women sexually empower themselves, women in rap succeed while flipping hip-hop's misogynist script, and as everything from dating etiquette to reproductive rights becomes a battleground, the gender wars have gotten the messiest they've been in my lifetime.

Savage has his own questionable outlooks on gender. When I ask him what his friendship with Drake is like, he says, "I feel like describing male friendships is zesty as hell." That there could even be something

> Savage got out of the streets gradually: "I never really stopped doing my thing until the music took off."

feminine or gay (as "zesty" can read as derogatory slang) about articulating the details of a male friendship speaks to the stigmas, taboos, and expectations that isolate men and stifle their expression. I say as much to Savage.

"There are these unneeded parameters around men and the way we expect them to express love or care or friendship," I propose.

"It's needed," says Savage. "That's what separates men from women." He tries to explain that gender norms are useful; emotional outbursts, he says, as an example, should be reserved for women, while men should approach conflict with "logic."

"Like in the argument, a man's supposed to think more about what he say," he says. "I feel like a woman is supposed to cry, like, 'Fuck this shit.'"

Buwop agrees. "The man and the girl can't be emotional," she says. "You have to give the girl room to be emotional."

Their point is that these gender roles create balance, but I say that both people in a relationship can work to achieve balance in themselves to bring balance to the unit.

"I get what you're saying, but I don't agree with it," says Savage before a correction: "Well, I agree with most of what you're saying. I just feel like the man supposed to be one way and the woman supposed to be one way." He acknowledges that we could have this debate all day, but leaves it there.

"The only weak spot I think I got is women," he told J. Cole in a viral clip. "I think the toughest niggas is the softest niggas with women." In 2017, he dismissed online critics who took aim at him for supporting his then-girlfriend Amber Rose's SlutWalk, an annual protest she held against gender inequality and sexual violence. He held a sign that said "I'm a hoe, too," and defended it when the wisecracks inevitably came.

There are love songs throughout his discography – some on heartbreak, like "ball w/o u," but several rather reverent, like "FaceTime," "Special," "out for the night," even "Spin Bout U," with Drake. But his music can also be salted with a dash of the objectification commonplace in hip-hop – as fans, women learn to swallow it – and as successful as *Her Loss* has been, the album faced critiques of cruelty, especially leveled because it's where Drake had most virulently tossed aside his own lover-boy image to taunt, degrade, and vilify women. Savage has been asked about the album's most jarring moment, on "Circo Loco," when Drake rapped, "This bitch lie 'bout getting shots, but she still a stallion." It seemed to obviously reference Megan Thee Stallion's shooting at the hands of Tory Lanez.

He's said he generally encouraged Drake's candor on the album, but talking to *Complex* – which named him the best rapper of 2022 – he got more specific: "I don't feel like that was his intention [to diss Megan]," Savage said. "Remember when I said I was telling him to not hold back, people tried to twist that to make it seem like I was talking about that situation. That bar was more of, like, a joke bar than him trying to say something about her. But I don't really like speaking on people's situations because life be real."

THE DRIVER MANEUVERS THE SUV through a nondescript garage door and down a slope, at the bottom of which Kar meets us. Three of the four levels in the building he occupies start on the 10th floor, so the 19 of us take a winding walk upward until we reach his assortment of Porsches, Ferraris, and Mercedes-Benzes. Kar and Meezy make loose plans for a music-video collaboration between Savage and L'art, but this meeting feels more like play than work. Savage and his massive crew almost look like schoolkids on the field trip of the year, gingerly exploring the scores of vehicles across the grounds.

An amusing motif in Savage's music is the 12-car garage he's rapped about, so I ask Savage how big his garage really is as he checks out a model of KITT, the black Pontiac Trans Am from *Knight Rider*. (He has the same kind of car in red, though his is a 1979, about a decade older than this one.) After a moment of consideration, Savage says his garage can probably fit 10 cars.

"That nigga got way more than 10," inserts Meezy. "I don't even know how many he got." [*Cont. on 77*]

OPENING AND FIFTH SPREADS: LEATHER APRON BY FENDI. JEWELRY IS SUBJECT'S OWN. SECOND SPREAD: WRAP BY MONTCLER + RICK OWENS. JEANS AND BOOTS BY CELINE. FOURTH SPREAD: JEANS BY CELINE. PREVIOUS SPREAD: LEATHER TRENCH BY BURBERRY.

The Steal 2024

Trump has found his 'new Dominion' in a mundane voting nonprofit

By Adam Rawnsley and Asawin Suebsaeng

OF ALL THE STRANGE, conspiratorial, and potentially dangerous theories Donald Trump and his allies came up with in the days after the 2020 election, this was the strangest, the most conspiratorial, the most potentially dangerous. ★ Millions of electronic ballots for Trump had been "deleted," and hundreds of thousands more had been

MARK PETERSON/REDUX

Round Two
Trump and his allies are focusing on a new bogeyman for this year's election.

"switched" to Joe Biden, Trump and his cronies in media, political, and legal circles insisted – thanks to software designed at the behest of Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez to rig foreign elections. Never mind that Chavez had been dead since 2013. Never mind that even Fox News' researchers said the claims about Dominion Voting Systems were "100 percent false."

Fox ultimately paid Dominion $787 million after its hosts ignored the network's research department and spread lies about the firm. But the consequences his allies have faced for pushing lies about the 2020 election have not diminished the former president's appetite for conspiracy theories. If anything, they have only stoked it.

Since then, Trump has fixated on new bogeymen. Lately, he has found one in a mundane nonprofit designed to spot the very voter fraud Team Trump professes to hate. Until recently, 33 states and the District of Columbia – a mixture of solidly Republican, Democratic, and battleground states – used data from the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) to spot voting irregularities and to identify and reach voters who haven't yet registered, a group that numbered 4.4 million people in 2022. ERIC has been employed in this way since 2012, without incident or controversy. But in Trump's imagination, ERIC is the engine for election rigging.

Last March, on his social media platform, Trump fumed that Republican governors should "immediately pull out of ERIC," and falsely labeled it a "terrible Voter Registration System that 'pumps the rolls' for Democrats and does nothing to clean them up." Over the past year, Trump has remained fixated on ERIC, sources who speak to him say. He's gone so far as to wonder aloud what can be done in the future to make it "illegal" nationwide – while key allies have begun a largely under-the-radar effort to market a replacement system. One person close to him has dubbed ERIC Trump's "new Dominion."

Just like Dominion – or, should we say, just like the Dominion in Trumpland's fever projections – ERIC is part of a larger architecture of voter fraud, one that has to be ripped out and replaced with a MAGA alternative before America goes to the polls in November. "Stop the Steal" die-hards are vying for spots in the 2024 campaign legal team. MAGA attorneys are challenging laws that make it easier to vote in Democratic strongholds. Trump's allies continue to question the integrity of the vote, even if polls show him slightly ahead. Because there can be no question about the final tally, in the Trump inner circle's view. There is only an election that ensures the right result: Trump's restoration to the White House.

YOU'VE PROBABLY never even heard of ERIC – until now, you'd have no reason to. So here's a brief primer: ERIC was created in 2012 by the nonpartisan Pew Charitable Trusts. It started with seven original member states with a goal of helping modernize their outdated, often paper-record-based voter-registration data – and offers trustworthy information to clean up voter rolls of deceased or ineligible voters. States are then able to securely share specific information about voters, like the last four digits of a Social Security number or a driver's license number, to eliminate any confusion about who a voter is and whether they're eligible to register.

John Merrill, Alabama's Republican secretary of state, was a fan. Having access to a pool of specific information about who's eligible to vote – and who's not – seemed like a gift. But when he traveled a couple of years ago to Washington, D.C., where renowned conservative attorney Cleta Mitchell was hosting a private, four-hour meeting for secretaries of state, he found himself in a lonely minority of ERIC supporters.

At that meeting, Mitchell made herself clear: She wanted these secretaries of state to pull out of ERIC. It was being used unfairly "to promote more Democrat registrations," Mitchell complained, according to Merrill's recollection. What's more, ERIC was actually created and funded by George Soros, the billionaire liberal donor and ultimate bête noire among GOP politicians and right-wing media. "Basically, what they wanted to talk about was why we needed to get rid of ERIC," Merrill tells ROLLING STONE.

This was, to Merrill's ears, odd. He knew Mitchell was a Trump ally; she served as a Trump 2020 campaign attorney and sat in on the infamous January 2021 phone call in which the former president demanded that the Georgia secretary of state "find" him 11,780 votes to overturn the state's election. Merrill was a Trump man himself. But this Soros stuff was bizarre. Merrill adds, "Not from Cleta Mitchell or anyone have I ever seen any empirical data that would support the position that George Soros is involved in or related to or had any influence at all in the creation or in the administration of the ERIC system."

So Merrill spoke up. ERIC was an incredibly valuable tool in protecting and administering free and fair American elections, Merrill told the room. He proposed an "information audit" to determine whether any partisan third parties had been involved in the nonprofit, whether it had adhered to its bylaws, and whether it had used its budget appropriately.

"They were very cool to my position," Merrill says.

That meeting was just one part of what has become a sustained pressure campaign against ERIC, which has risen to the highest levels of the Republican Party, that involves angry demands from the former president, conspiracy theories in far-right media, and GOP secretaries of state too willing to give into them; nine Republican-led states have left ERIC in the past two years.

Trump-aligned activists' efforts to discredit the system and strong-arm states into withdrawing opens up the possibility that departing state members – including a number of key 2024 battleground states – could face chaos on Election Day and afterward.

"Their voter lists are likely to be significantly less accurate," David Becker, a co-founder and former executive director of ERIC, says of the states that have left ERIC. Becker resigned from the organization in 2023 following a right-wing pressure campaign against him. "There will be old records on the voter lists of people who are no longer eligible in the state that will fuel false claims of potential voter fraud. And there will be inaccurate records [of those] who are eligible in the state who moved within the state that they will likely not catch."

That's a huge problem. "Faulty voter files create long lines on Election Day, delays in getting mail-in ballots, an increase in provisional ballots, and delays in determining a winner," Becker says. "The bigger potential damage here is that election losers – people who have lost an election or perceive themselves to be about to lose an election – will have more time and more space to create false narratives about an election being stolen.

"The more problems at the polls, the more lines, the more provisional ballots, the longer it takes to count overall ballots and get an unofficial winner, those all feed into the potential for chaos and even incitement to violence by election losers."

In other words, the 2024 election could see the same maelstrom following 2020.

THE SPRAWLING conservative quest against ERIC appears to have begun in earnest in the swamps of conspiracy-theory media. In January 2022, the pro-Trump blog Gateway Pundit published a three-part series accusing ERIC of being a secret plot by Soros to create a "left-wing voter registration drive disguised as voter-roll clean up."

It's a far cry from the boring but necessary work ERIC actually does. In addition to checking for outdated voter information, it produces reports on citizens who are eligible to vote but unregistered. Once every two years, ERIC requires its participating states to conduct outreach to those eligible but unregistered potential voters and offer them information on how they can register to vote – often via postcards.

Some Republican officials, including Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, who withdrew his state last year, have objected to that requirement, writing that "members should not be forced" to conduct such outreach if they don't believe it's "necessary or relevant." But it's hardly the stuff of florid conspiracy theories spun by the Gateway Pundit.

When the site ran its series on ERIC, 33 states were members of the nonprofit. But after, Louisiana Secretary of State Kyle Ardoin announced he would suspend the state's participation in ERIC following concerns from the public about "potential questionable funding sources" and "possibly partisan actors" accessing ERIC data. As the right-wing conspiracy meme gained steam, eight other Republican-led states, including critical 2024 ones such as Virginia, Ohio, and Florida, followed suit, leading ERIC membership to plummet to 24 states and the District of Columbia today.

"I'm disappointed that some of my fellow secretaries of state would surrender to the conspiracy theories," says Adrian Fontes, the Democratic secretary

"The more problems at the polls, the more lines, the more provisional ballots," says David Becker, ERIC co-founder, "those all feed into the potential for chaos and even incitement to violence by election losers."

ADAM RAWNSLEY *and* ASAWIN SUEBSAENG *are* RS *political reporters.*

The Players Cleta Mitchell [ABOVE] met with secretaries of state to push them to pull out of ERIC. Former Alabama secretary of state John Merrill [BELOW] says he spoke up in defense of the voter-registration tool at the meeting.

FROM TOP: TRAVIS DOVE/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX; JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

of state in Arizona. "If they care about voter-file accuracy and integrity, ERIC is the only tool available to make that a reality."

Pennsylvania's Secretary of the Commonwealth Al Schmidt says, "The perversity with a lot of this is that the arguments against ERIC are allegedly coming from a place of interest in election integrity, when in reality, ERIC is quite possibly the most valuable, useful tool that we have to strengthen election integrity." A Republican who considers himself a hawk on election-integrity issues, Schmidt served as Philadelphia city commissioner and helped investigate instances of voter fraud that led to federal prosecutions.

But the theories about ERIC began to spread. It became such "a big thing," says Merrill, the former Alabama secretary of state, that he worried "certain allies" who "do not have [Trump's] best interests at heart" would try to sway the former president into waging war on ERIC.

Merrill says he's had several conversations with Trump over the past year to make it clear he's steadfastly pro-ERIC. During these brief talks, including a 30-minute breakfast at Mar-a-Lago, Merrill told Trump to call him any time if he wanted to understand the benefits of ERIC – why its conservative critics were dead wrong.

It didn't work: Though, Merrill says, the former president politely listened to his defense of ERIC, Trump has yet to take him up on his offer. In fact, in the time since that breakfast, according to other sources close to Trump, the ex-president went in the opposite direction and only fell deeper into the ERIC-hating lore. At different points this summer, Trump vented about ERIC to some of his lawyers and campaign staff, simply referring to it as a "really bad" system created "by George Soros" that needs to be "taken out." (A rep for Soros' Open Society Foundations has said it "never funded" ERIC. A spokesman for Trump did not provide comment for this story.)

TRUMP'S PLANS for the 2024 election extend well beyond meddling with ERIC.

The former president was removed from the White House, he believes, because his allies were weak – not like Trump, who has called for "the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution" to nullify the 2020 election results. Trump has spent the past three years moaning to friends at his clubs, to conservative lawmakers, and to political advisers that Democrats will try to "cheat" again, and that the GOP must do "everything" it can to make sure liberals are "stopped," according to four people familiar with this matter.

One key component: making sure his government-in-waiting is stocked with people truly "tough" on supposed Democratic "rigging" in elections.

"The [former] president has pushed for us to hit the Democrats on all sides on the [upcoming] election," says a person close to Trump who has spoken to him about this matter multiple times.

Back in early 2021, then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi proved to be one of his more potent enemies, pushing through an impeachment of Trump for his role in inciting the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection. Rep. Mike Johnson of Louisiana, on the other hand, was a dependable Trump ally, rounding up dozens of colleagues to sign onto the Trump-backed Supreme Court brief seeking to toss out the election and echoing Trump's lies about voting machines rigging vote tallies. Pelosi was gone soon thereafter. And in October 2023, MAGA Republicans elected one of their own to the position: Johnson.

Not long afterward, Trump said he was pleased, because "[Mike is] good on elections," according to a source with direct knowledge of the matter.

Ahead of the 2022 midterms, there was a large-scale attempt to place as many MAGA-friendly election deniers in as many key positions as possible – particularly in secretary of state posts that could profoundly affect the 2024 outcome. That plan was dashed when the Democratic Party overperformed at the polls, forestalling a predicted GOP "red wave."

But with Johnson's rise, the leadership for congressional Republicans has only become more drenched in right-wing election denial. And think tanks and party bigwigs are providing a blueprint for what comes next. Project 2025, a policy conglomerate run out of the influential Heritage Foundation, is providing plans for how a reelected Trump could revamp the Department of Justice and other independent bodies into little more than personal attack dogs to sic on his political enemies.

Plus, there are strategies in place for Nov. 5, 2024. Major party organs like the Republican National Committee are launching programs to recruit and deploy tens of thousands of GOP poll watchers and "election integrity directors" to battlegrounds in order to – in the words of Trump ally and RNC Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel – "hold Democrats accountable for bad laws that make voting less secure." And in a December speech in Iowa, Trump asked supporters to "go into" Democratic cities like Philadelphia, Detroit, and Atlanta so they can "guard the vote."

Then there are mail-in ballots. They proved crucial for Biden's 2020 victory, and Trump has repeatedly called them a "scam." So over the past three years, MAGA Republicans in a number of states have passed bills attempting to restrict voting access, particularly around mail-in ballots. In private, Trump has made it obvious in his conversations with political aides and conservative grassroots leaders that he only views mailed-in ballots as wholly legitimate if they're sent in by his supporters.

Finally, Trump needs lawyers he can trust, especially now that attorneys who helped his efforts to overturn the 2020 election have struck plea deals and cooperated with prosecutors in Georgia's Fulton County election-interference case. [*Cont. on 80*]

THE IVY LEAGUE BODY BANDITS

They donated their bodies to Harvard Medical School. Then they were snuck out of the morgue and sold to a dark and ghastly corner of the oddities world

BY BRENNA EHRLICH

ILLUSTRATION BY JASON HOLLEY

IN SLEEPY, SUBURBAN Saugus, Massachusetts, sisters Robyn D'Apolito and Nicole MacTaggart pack up the car, getting ready to meet about 30 members of their friends and family at Castle Rock Park in Marblehead. It's July 2022, high season for the New England shore, but this isn't a typical trip to the beach. The sisters are on their way to scatter the ashes of their mother, Adele Mazzone, at her favorite place: where she used to sit with her toes in the sand, eating ice cream, while her kids scrambled over stony outcroppings as the waves crashed below. ¶ Before heading to the sea wall, D'Apolito carefully sets up little plastic condiment containers in the back of her car, pouring the fine gray ashes into each. Then she passes a cup to each mourner, all dressed in white for the occasion. This was Mazzone's last wish, to be laid to rest at sea. One by one, they pour their portions into the breeze. A peaceful final goodbye. ¶ "It was a beautiful day," D'Apolito tells me.

After Mazzone died three years earlier at age 74 of complications from a stroke, her remains had been handed over to Harvard as part of the Anatomical Gift Program, a donation-based initiative in which people can leave their bodies to the school for students to use during their studies. Harvard Medical School is among the top in the country – it ranked Number One for research in 2023 – which means Mazzone's selfless last act would help to train the future of American medicine.

"Since we were little, my mom would always say, 'I want to go to college. I'm going to Harvard,' " D'Apolito says, fiddling with the pages of Mazzone's journal, full of musings and prayers for her family. Her mom never got the chance to go on to higher education, despite being a voracious reader and having an endlessly curious mind. Still, she was from Massachusetts – so, for Mazzone, there was no more revered institution than Harvard.

On June 14, nearly a year after that summer night they had scattered their mother's ashes, MacTaggart turned on the TV. Harvard was splashed all over the local news. Cedric Lodge, the manager of a morgue at Harvard Medical School, had been indicted by a federal grand jury in Pennsylvania – along with several others – on charges of conspiracy and interstate transport of stolen goods. The broadcast went on to explain that those so-called goods were body parts from corpses donated to the Anatomical Gift Program – the very same program to which Mazzone had proudly donated her body.

"I was having a heart attack," MacTaggart says. "I had no idea what was going on." Her first instinct was to call the university, but it was nighttime. When she returned home from work the next day, there was a certified letter in her mailbox that confirmed her worst fears.

"We cannot rule out the potential that Adele Mazzone's remains may have been impacted," the printed letter read. "We are deeply sorry for the pain and uncertainty caused by this troubling news."

Were those ashes – the ones they'd received in a plain black box in the mail from Harvard, the ones they'd so carefully divided up among their family members to scatter at sea, the last remaining physical presence of their mother – possibly not even their mother at all?

YOU COULD SPEND years on the picturesque grounds of Harvard and never think much of the block of medical buildings that house the morgue. They're not those beautiful red-brick buildings with ivy crawling up the side – instead they're marble, gray, and austere. The main one sits on the south side of the quad lawn, a stately piece of architecture framed with imposing columns and an American flag waving proudly on top, like a miniature version of the White House. You could pass right by the buildings every day and never give a thought to the fact that somewhere beyond those columns is where bodies go when they're donated for dissection and study, and stored before they're eventually cremated.

Once a body is given over to Harvard, that's meant to be its final destination, where various parts are studied by Ivy League students suited up in surgical gowns and latex gloves. Future doctors and dentists work carefully on their assigned embalmed cadavers, learning about, say, the collection of nerves in the upper arm, or the tiny ligaments and bones that come together at the knee. They're taught and tested and trained, and the donor's ashes are then usually handed back over to their family, their final sacrifice complete. The donors are generous people like Mazzone, who opted to give up traditional burials in the name of science.

When a grieving son or daughter hands over their loved one to an institution like Harvard, they're trusting the storied institution to handle them with respect. They're passing over their parent or grandparent believing that they're in safe hands with the academy.

But in 2018, the unthinkable happened. Lodge, the longtime manager of the university's morgue, and his wife, Denise, a former New Hampshire state government worker, allegedly started selling pieces from those donated bodies. The imprimatur of the Harvard morgue – the official procedures, the sterile facilities – became twisted and entwined with a dark corner of the world of oddity enthusiasts, people who collect out-there specimens. Donors were traded like baseball cards. And for years, family members, who thought their loved ones were laid to rest, were none the wiser.

MORGUE MANAGER CEDRIC Lodge and his wife haven't spoken publicly since their arrest – Cedric's lawyer declined to comment, while Denise's did not respond to my request – so we'll have to go off the indictments to explain what allegedly happened in that morgue over those five years.

Lodge – who, along with his wife, pleaded not guilty – allegedly allowed people to secretly come into the morgue he ran to pick out human remains to buy and take home. The customers were largely oddity collectors, people who buy strange things like medical equipment or taxidermy, and sometimes transform them into new creations like jewelry or figures. There's a particularly macabre segment of the world of oddities made up of people who don't just collect unusual knickknacks – but actual human body parts.

One of the Harvard morgue customers, according to prosecutors, was Katrina Maclean, who owned a store called Kat's Creepy Creations in Peabody, Massachusetts. "I paint creepy dolls and play with dead things for a living," Maclean, who also pleaded not guilty, said of her business in a 2021 podcast. Her store, now closed, sold figurines dressed up like haunted clowns, vampires, and other creatures – these dolls were sometimes made up of human bones. Another patron was Pennsylvania oddity collector Joshua Taylor, who runs a ghoulish Instagram account called Angry Beard Antiques, featuring photos of skulls, bones, and postmortem daguerreotypes of dead children. (Like his fellow defendants, Taylor also pleaded not guilty. His lawyer declined to comment.) Lodge and his wife also allegedly shipped remains across the country to buyers they had met on social media, and stored various body parts at their New Hampshire home.

Once the remains were furtively released from the campus to these collectors, they continued to travel, bartered and traded via Facebook messages.

This kind of oddity collecting has been around for centuries, capturing the imagination of folks throughout the world. And it's mostly technically legal. Aside from the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which was established to repatriate Native remains from museums and federal agencies back to their families, there are no federal laws that prohibit owning human bones, Wake Forest School of Law professor Tanya D. Marsh tells me. And there's also no federal law against the trade of so-called wet specimens – the repugnant term for non-skeletal remains. (There are eight states where the sale of remains is pretty broadly illegal, however, including Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Texas.

GUTTER PHOTO CREDIT

Jeremy Pauley (above) is the alleged linchpin to a vast body-stealing operation that includes Harvard Medical School morgue manager Cedric Lodge (right). Lodge allegedly allowed oddity collectors into the morgue to select and purchase body parts — with families not finding out for years.

BRENNA EHRLICH *is the chief research editor at* ROLLING STONE *and writes about crime and music.*

Doreen Gordon (right) was known as the Cookie Lady. Adele Mazzone (below, with her granddaughter Brianna) enjoying a day at her favorite place, the beach. Both women are possible victims of the Ivy League body bandits.

himself in school. He was into a lot of science-fiction stuff," says high school classmate Kevin Garraway. "If you're looking to see if there's like a dark side to him or something like that, I've never seen it."

His neighbor Palmer agrees: "I know a lot of journalists and news outlets want to hear 'This guy was up all night running a chain saw in his basement,' but it wasn't like that."

Lodge wasn't the only morgue worker alleged to have been caught up in this operation, though – the stolen-bodies network extended beyond Harvard. Candace Chapman Scott, a mortuary worker from Little Rock, Arkansas, was also allegedly involved; she, too, pleaded not guilty. Scott's mortuary worked, in part, with the University of Arkansas for Medical Services to cremate remains from its Anatomical Gift Program, as well as from local funeral homes. Scott's indictment implies that she stole corpses from the program – the delivery of new bodies to the school often aligns with her sales to an oddities collector named Jeremy Pauley – but a representative from the school denies that its cadavers were involved. The school has since terminated its contract with Scott's former mortuary. A lawyer for Scott confirms she's in an Arkansas jail after undergoing a mental evaluation, and says, "We're in the process of going through discovery."

There's nothing in the indictments that says Lodge and Scott worked together directly. It was Pauley who was allegedly the connective tissue between their dual black markets, often reselling Scott's stolen body parts to other collectors, including Lodge's "clients."

The Lodges were charged by federal prosecutors – and not with any crimes on the state level.)

There's "a whole group of people that find a kind of beauty in the macabre," says Tonya Hurley, a founding member of the Morbid Anatomy Museum, a now-defunct nonprofit in Brooklyn that sought to educate the public on nature, death, anatomy, and the like through exhibits and talks. Institutions like the Mütter Museum at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, which was established in 1863 and sees more than 100,000 visitors per year, share that same goal. Mütter displays body parts in an effort to teach visitors about their own anatomy as well as medical abnormalities. And there are myriad oddity fairs and showcases that draw thousands worldwide. "It's taboo to talk about death," Hurley says, which is exactly why the study of remains can be fascinating to some. People in this community see it as an effort to lessen that taboo and demystify dying.

The Mütter Museum, the fairs – they may give some people the creeps, but they're legally aboveboard. Though it's not uncommon for bad actors to crop up in this world. "Grave robbing has been going on for centuries," Hurley says. "The Harvard incident exposed the black market once again."

And that's what made the whole thing so shocking: that this happened at such an esteemed university – and that the alleged customers were seemingly purchasing these body parts as some sort of gruesome, underground hobby, and to turn a profit. These kinds of illicit sales are usually conducted by medical schools and programs that can't afford their own bodies, says Dr. Thomas H. Champney, a professor of cell biology at the University of Miami. But these donors had opted to be part of the donation program and were passed along to nonprofessionals. "The oddity collectors through Harvard, it's actually kind of the worst example of how it goes, because those people really have no reasonable rationale for owning or obtaining those tissues," Champney adds.

Law professor Marsh agrees: "I was not particularly surprised that there was a network of people selling human remains in this way. I *was* a little surprised that they were being taken from Harvard Medical School."

Harvard Medical School declined to comment, instead pointing me toward a statement on its website which explains that Lodge has been fired and that Harvard was unaware of his actions.

Lodge's turn from respected morgue manager to alleged body thief was a shock to those who knew him. Lodge is known in his Manchester, New Hampshire, neighborhood as the guy who is "slightly eccentric at Halloween," says his neighbor, Alan Palmer. But, in hindsight, many details of Lodge's life do seem curious. There's Lodge's Facebook picture, which is a jack-o'-lantern, and his family car's vanity license plate, which reads "Grim-R." And then there are the Zillow photos of the Lodge family's previous home, which they sold in 2020 before moving next door to Palmer; inside the purple-and-white Victorian squatted stone gargoyles and multiple refrigerators – including one in the bedroom.

But mostly, people who knew the Lodges describe them as quirky but relatively normal. "He was quiet, you know. He had a select group of guys that was like

"Grave robbing has been going on for centuries. The Harvard incident exposed the black market."

THIS WHOLE TWISTED operation might have continued had Sarah Pauley not ventured over to her husband Jeremy's side of the basement in July 2022.

As she tells the story now, her blue eyes narrow. " 'Just stay the fuck out of there. I don't want to hear you bitch.' That's what he said," she tells me. "He was like, 'Stay away from that side. It's not your business. It's not your stuff.' "

Sarah was only 21 when she started dating Jeremy after hitting it off with the then-35-year-old at his Pennsylvania vape shop. She knew he collected body parts – she thought it was kind of cool. He showed her pictures of bones and preserved specimens. "I didn't know you could own stuff like that," she says.

But the relationship quickly became troubled. Sarah tells me that Jeremy was abusive and she first tried to leave him in June 2021 – then came back to try to make the marriage work. After moving back in, though, she says, Jeremy became convinced she was cheating and threatened to cut her into pieces. (Domestic-violence charges were never brought against Jeremy, and through his lawyer, he says he never made that threat.) Sarah filed a temporary Protection From Abuse Order against him, and he was evicted from their home in June 2022. Which leads us to the day she went to Jeremy's side of the basement.

There were empty specimen jars, Tupperware full of mysterious fluids, sloshing Home Depot buckets, and a faded picture of Jesus propped against a stack of boxes, watching over it all. [*Cont. on 78*]

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: EAST PENNSBORO TOWNSHIP POLICE DEPARTMENT; STEVEN PORTER/"BOSTON GLOBE"/GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF THE FAMILIES

THE HOTHEAD

BURNING UP PRO BOWLING

As bowling pushes closer to cultural relevance, 26-year-old Anthony Simonsen's dynamic personality and record-shattering talent are tailor-made for him to take the PBA to the next level and become its new face — whether he likes it or not

BY ZACH HARRIS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKAYLA WHITMORE

"SIMO'S IN THIS?"

"*Pfft*. Fuck."

It's 3 p.m. on a Friday in late July, and it's 114 degrees outside. I'm 15 minutes off the Las Vegas Strip at South Point Casino, eavesdropping as I follow two twentysomethings up an escalator – I'm here to meet the guy they're scared of.

South Point is what you would call old Vegas. There are no celebrity chefs or pop-star residencies here, the blackjack odds are better than they are on the Strip, the buffet line is long, and the ornate red and gold carpet will make you dizzy if you look at it for longer than a second.

Up the escalator, past the seniors choking down cigarettes in the hallway outside of the cavernous bingo hall is the South Point Bowling Plaza, a 60-lane center with stadium seating and a wall of massive scoreboards. The Plaza routinely hosts Professional Bowlers Association and Professional Women's Bowlers Association title events.

The PBA schedule winds down over the summer though, so today is not one of those days. Today's tournament is the Vegas Valley Open Team Challenge hosted by the Amateur Bowling Tour, and tucked away at the far end of the center on lane 54, Anthony Simonsen is Steph Curry in a slide sole pulling up to a pickup run at the park, asking who's got next. "This is like the fourth time I've bowled in two months," he says with a smirk. "You like Korean barbeque? I've got a great spot."

Simonsen, a.k.a. Simo, is a 26-year-old high school dropout and, depending on who you ask, currently the best bowler alive. Raised in Mesquite, Texas, and now living here in Vegas, Simonsen is coming off one of the most successful years in PBA Tour history, the first bowler ever to finish in the top 10 in every tournament and crack the top four in every major. Simonsen took home three tournament wins in 2023, including a back-to-back victory at the Masters, one of bowling's five annual major tournaments, outside Detroit, culminating in a viral celebration that saw Simonsen flex a pair of Buffs – Cartier Buffalo Horn sunglasses, the holy grail of Motor City fashion – on live TV. The $100,000 Masters title added to Simonsen's seven-figure PBA winnings total, and made him the youngest bowler ever to win one, two, three, four, and now five majors.

The PBA's most polarizing pro, Simonsen has a well-deserved reputation as a hothead. In addition to his accomplishments this season, Simonsen also led the tour in fines, a distinction he's held for the past few years. Over his career, Simonsen has punched himself in the head midgame; separated scoring computers from their stanchions; kicked ball returns; been turned in to tournament officials by friends on tour for slamming balls on the return, swearing, and generally "acting like an asshole"; told Fox producers that if they wanted him to stop cussing on live TV they should take his mic off; and routinely complained about the quality of bowling-center equipment and the competition format.

As bowling pushes closer to its next high point on the roller coaster of cultural relevance, with a 15 percent bump in PBA TV ratings this year, ink drying on a two-year extension with Fox, a new trading-card deal, a growing parasocial presence online, and wait lists for social and competitive leagues across the country, Simonsen's combination of brash attitude, youth, and dynamic personality built from equal parts intensity and apathy, paired with his record-shattering talent and explosive creativity is tailor-made to take pro bowling to the next level. Love him or hate him – and there's plenty of hate, just check the comment sections – Simonsen is the new face of the PBA whether he likes it or not.

SIMONSEN WASN'T PLANNING on bowling today, never mind in an amateur tournament, but his friends Ari, Jessica, and JP need a fourth for their squad, so here he is, waiting until the last five minutes of practice to change out of his Air Max 97s into his Dexters and throw a couple of practice shots to test the lanes. They're hooking more than he expected, but a quick switch to a ball called Pitch Black gives him more control.

By the end of the first game, Simonsen has found his strike shot, put on a wide, toothy grin for at least 10 photos with fans, and irritated at least a few bowlers, one of whom walked over to see what the fuss was about, spotted Simonsen, and threw up his arms in exasperated frustration, his body language saying it all: "If he's here, why bother?" Simonsen is used to it. He's been getting that reaction for as long as he can remember.

When Simonsen was six, his dad, Benjamin, heard about a charity bowling night hosted by a local Dallas sports-radio station and reached out to the organizers, putting his son up as a challenger against DJ Dan McDowell in the final match. Simonsen beat the shock jock so badly that at the next year's charity event, McDowell replaced the first-grader with a blind woman. "I needed to win one," McDowell later said on air.

Simonsen's parents worked too much and never made enough money. Benjamin sold diesel parts, and Simonsen's mother, Teresa, worked at a grocery store. If Simonsen wasn't in school, the bowling center played babysitter. Lifelong league bowlers, Teresa and Benjamin spent most nights at the bowling alley, either on the lanes or at the bar.

"It became, 'We're in the bar, he's bowling, everyone in the bowling center knows if we need something here's where we are, and if we need him that's where he is,' " Simonsen says.

Between Jupiter Lanes, Plano Super Bowl, and Rowlett Bowl-a-Rama, Simonsen clocked more hours on the lanes as a kid in East Dallas than he did at school or home. He jokes that he was fired from his first job, restocking rental shoes, at the age of five because he got in trouble with his kindergarten teacher. Simonsen's parents were already struggling to discipline him at home, so like with everything else in their lives, they turned to the bowling center for help.

During the summers, Teresa would drop elementary-aged Simonsen at Jupiter Lanes on her way to work, and then stop by after her shift for Miller Lites and

By the end of the first game, Simonsen has found his strike shot, put on a wide, toothy grin for at least 10 photos with fans, and irritated at least a few bowlers.

Two-handers are known for their power, but Simonsen has found success with finesse.

COURTESY OF THE PROFESSIONAL BOWLERS ASSOCIATION (PBA)

ZACH HARRIS *is a writer based in Philadelphia. This is his first story for* ROLLING STONE.

too many cigarettes. Simonsen's brother Bobby, 10 years his senior, Teresa's son from a previous relationship, and a gifted competitive bowler in his own right, slowed and eventually stopped bowling as he developed a years-long struggle with opioid addiction.

Simonsen's childhood was spent running around the centers, hanging out behind the counters and annoying older bowlers. He would set up shop one lane over from the house locals, tournament bowlers 20 years his senior who spent their nights bowling pot games for cash, and practice nonstop, catching rides home at two or three in the morning when the older guys were too tired to throw or ran out of money.

By 12, Simonsen was entering tournaments against bowlers on the nation's best college teams, including Wichita State – the Duke basketball of college bowling. Two-time PBA-major winner Kris Prather, then a bowler at Wichita, remembers it clearly.

"We're bowling with other college guys, and I'm bowling next to this kid who's bowling two-handed – he was one of the first two-handers I saw," Prather tells me. "He's striking like every single shot and walking around like he owns the building. I wish I had that kind of confidence when I was that age."

At 15, five months into his freshman year, Simonsen dropped out of high school. Well, he never formally dropped out – in Texas, you have to be 17 with a parent's signature to do that – he just stopped showing up.

"There'd be days we're driving to school, the gas gauge is broken, and it's, 'Well, we put five bucks in yesterday, but then we drove around some,' so I don't know if they can drive me there and then pick me up later," Simonsen says.

Plano Super Bowl used to be open 24 hours, seven days a week, and by his 16th birthday, Simonsen was working the 9 p.m.-3 a.m. shift, learning how to fix every inch of the center and sleeping on couches at friends' houses or in guest rooms at the houses of older bowlers. He still stopped home a few times a week, but he wasn't living there [*Cont. on 79*]

After Two Decades Undercover, She's Ready to Tell the Real Story of Human Trafficking

BY ALEX MORRIS
PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM DRISCOLL

FBI Special Agent Nikki Badolato: "It's easier for people to ignore the problem than deal with the issues on a societal level."

ON AN AUGUST night in 2003, a young woman who went by the name Paulina sank into the sofa of her modest, rented apartment, opened up her laptop, and began talking about sex with a man she'd recently met in a Yahoo chat group. His name was Stephen Bolen. His first communications had been terse, but he soon warmed to Paulina. It didn't take long for both of them to begin to open up.

Paulina had told Bolen she lived in the Atlanta area, that she had a three-year-old daughter, that her daughter's father was no longer in the picture. Soon, she was sharing more intimate details: what it was like growing up a skinny white girl in a rough neighborhood outside of D.C.; how her dad, a Marine, had died by suicide two weeks before she was born; how her mom had been emotionally and physically abusive, and had never really shown her love. How she'd had a sexual relationship with her stepfather.

Paulina would put her daughter to bed and then she and Bolen would chat throughout the night, over Yahoo and sometimes on the phone. The back-and-forth could feel like dating, but with an added element of danger and risk: Both Paulina and Bolen knew they were tiptoeing up to a line to see if they trusted each other enough to cross it. It could take a while to figure that out.

Eventually, Bolen asked Paulina to send pictures of her daughter, and she agreed to do so, though the ones she'd shared were chaste – the little girl clothed and her face turned away from the camera or obscured behind an untamable halo of blond curls. After seeing the pictures, Bolen asked to meet. While a lot of the men Paulina had encountered in chatrooms like "Sex With Younger" just wanted to trade images and videos of children, to expand their illicit collections, Bolen was a "traveler," someone looking to act upon his obsessions.

On Sept. 17, just as they'd arranged, Paulina sat on a bench outside Perimeter Mall with a stroller parked in front of her, scanning the parking lot nervously. Part of her hoped Bolen wouldn't show. When he did, she could see he was handsome, a preppy guy in a pink polo shirt and khakis. "Paulina?" he asked eagerly. She nodded. As he smiled and pulled back the blanket draped across the stroller, he found himself surrounded, handcuffs slipped around his wrists.

"Paulina" watched his face fall, his confusion giving way to distress as FBI agents took him into custody. It was her first undercover arrest. It would be the first of many.

IF ONE WANTED to hide in plain sight, one could do no better than the tidy, suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of St. Louis, where FBI Special Agent Nikki Badolato now resides. The well-tended, two-story homes are so pleasantly indistinct that I could hardly tell you what hers looks like, even if it were safe for me to do so, which it is not. Suffice to say that Midwestern comfort and conformity unspool around every gently winding curve. Here Badolato has raised her two children, a daughter who is now in college and a son who is a junior at a local high school. When planning a neighborhood scavenger hunt or tending the community garden, Badolato does not often mention her many years as head of the Child Exploitation Task Force, a joint effort between the feds and local law enforcement that targets some of the country's most heinous crimes. Open a cabinet in her kitchen, however, and a government-issued Glock 42 can be found stowed away between the vitamins and mixing bowls.

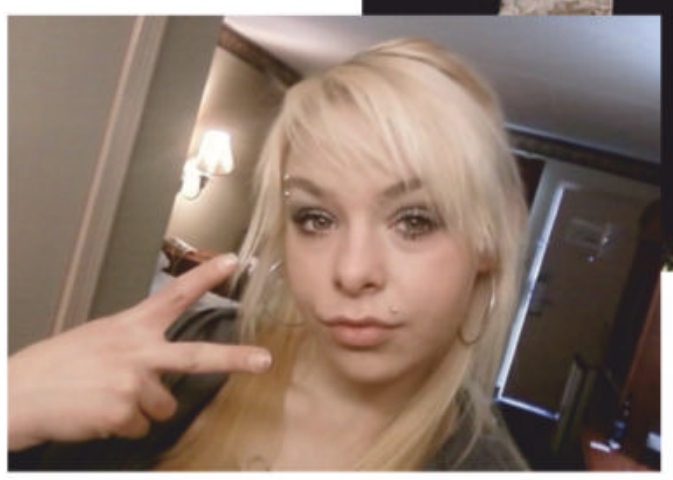
On a sunny morning this past October, Badolato sat at her dining room table, scrapbooks and albums spread out before her on the dark wood. There was the acceptance letter she'd received from the bureau the spring of her senior year of high school, after a representative had shown up to administer a test in the typewriting room. "I chose to wear a red dress and red heels," she says of her first day as an FBI mail clerk, two weeks after her 18th birthday. "I don't know what the hell I was thinking. I guess maybe I was trying to go in bold?" She pauses at a picture of herself on the gun range at Quantico almost 10 years later, her shoulders squared and her caramel hair pulled back into a ponytail as she fires off rounds. By then, she'd married a man she met just after high school, had a little girl, completed college at night, and been accepted into agent training in the heady days after 9/11. She'd seen her first dead body only a few weeks into the job, after the pursuit of a bank robber ended with a shootout in a Walmart. When Badolato got to the scene, the body was still warm, and the perp's head was resting on a bag of cookies. "It was surreal," she says. "How many times have you been in a Walmart and walked down Aisle 4, not really expecting there to be a dead person with his head lying on a bag of Chips Ahoy?"

Badolato wasn't deterred. She felt like the bureau saved her, plucked her out of a shitty home life, and gave her prospects and purpose. As a new agent, she was intent on proving herself worthy. "My training agent told me, 'You know, Nikki, it's a marathon, not a sprint,'" she says. "I was like, 'That's ridiculous. I don't even know what that's supposed to mean.'" She turned a few pages to show a picture of the 391 kilos of cocaine and 140 pounds of meth she'd recovered on a single raid during a stint with a cartel squad, then pointed out another in which she poses with a five-year-old child she'd rescued, the little girl's hair cut short because the kidnapper had wanted her to look like a boy. But the keepsake she really wants to find is the card that Bolen's wife had pressed into her hand at his sentencing, the one with the picture of their children – a blond girl of about three years and a tiny baby – and the words "These are the faces of the children you protect each day." Bolen's wife had been the only one she'd ever encountered who had lobbied for her husband to receive the maximum sentence. Some wives accused the FBI of planting evidence inside computers. Most seemed intent on clinging to their delusions. (Attempts to reach Bolen for comment were unsuccessful.)

Which, Badolato has come to understand, is the way it goes with child trafficking and sexual abuse. She had invited me into her home – had agreed to speak on the record about her decades-long career working undercover – because when it comes to the crimes she's spent her career fighting, she has had enough of the delusions people are under. She's had enough of the way movies like *Sound of Freedom* both glamorize and trivialize the work she and her colleagues do, enough of the idea that swashbuckling white men burst through doors and rescue trafficked children with a Bible in one hand and a firearm in the other, enough of conspiracy theories about Hollywood and Washington that detract from the real root causes of why children are trafficked and abused. "Human trafficking is not the movie *Pretty Woman* – the girl doesn't get the guy – and it's not the movie *Taken*, where people are kidnapped in a foreign country and sold on the black market, or shipped in a container across the world," one of the detectives who worked on Badolato's task force tells me. "I'm not saying that doesn't ever happen, but it's not what we're seeing."

Senior writer ALEX MORRIS *wrote about the children of football in the September issue.*

"Right now some little girl is being dropped off in the parking lot of a motel. There are four girls holed up in a hotel next to a McDonald's. It is happening all the time."



Top: Badolato's unit with a kidnapping victim after her recovery in 2011. A Health and Human Services review found that roughly 199,000 American minors are sexually exploited each year, and that as many as 325,000 American youths are considered to be at risk of being trafficked in the sex industry. Below: Korina Ellison, a trafficking survivor, pictured around the time she was recovered by Badolato's task force.

What they are seeing is a lot more insidious and a lot more homegrown. A report released in 2018 by the State Department ranked the U.S. as one of the worst countries in the world for human trafficking. While the Department of Justice has estimated that between 14,500 and 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into this country every year, this number pales in comparison to the number of American minors who are trafficked within it: A 2009 Department of Health and Human Services review of human trafficking into and within the United States found that roughly 199,000 American minors are sexually exploited each year, and that between 244,000 and 325,000 American youths are considered to be at risk of being trafficked specifically in the sex industry. Heartbreakingly, many of these children are victimized not by strangers who've abducted them from mall parking lots but rather by people they know and trust: Studies have found that as much as 44 percent of victims are trafficked by family members, most often parents (and not infrequently parents who were trafficked themselves). Between 2011 and 2020, there was an 84 percent increase in the number of people prosecuted for a federal human-trafficking offense. Of the defendants charged in 2020, 92 percent were male, 63 percent were white, 66 percent had no prior convictions, and 95 percent were U.S. citizens.

Badolato started her career as an FBI agent in some of the earliest days that children could be bought, sold, and traded online. As the internet-porn industry mushroomed, its most lucrative branch turned out to be that of child sexual-abuse materials (the term "child pornography" is no longer used by those in the field, as it implies consent). And as demand for these images increased, so did the abuse that led to their creation.

In 2003, just a few months after Badolato graduated from Quantico, a Crimes Against Children squad was formed in the Atlanta office where she'd been stationed. By then, the FBI was starting to get a handle on the extent of the problem – if not exactly what to do about it. At a weeklong training in Baltimore, Badolato was given a tour of the darkest underbelly of fetish chat groups and then instructed to figure out how to infiltrate. "Everyone was a little nervous," she explains of the directive. "It was a process, a direction that was new." Agents were told that they would need to come up with a "persona" and a "story," and that they would likely have to provide images of children to "prove" they had a minor on offer. They were also told that they could use images of their own children, if they were comfortable doing so (the FBI no longer endorses this policy).

Badolato developed "Paulina" based on her understanding that any persona would need to share most of her own backstory and traits. "That's the only way you can really do undercover work," Badolato says. "People can tell the sincerity in what you're saying, so there has to be a level of genuineness, but then you just add this criminal element to it." Most of the things Badolato had told Bolen were true: where she was from, her family background, the monstrousness of her mother, a woman who she says would pass out cigarettes and beers to Badolato's 13-year-old friends in a state of manic permissiveness one minute and fly into a violent rage about a piece of lint on the floor the next. (Badolato's mother declined to comment for this article, but a childhood friend corroborated Badolato's account.) It was true that growing up in an unstable home with a string of stepdads, she had never really felt loved, true that she had divorced her first husband, true that she was raising their three-year-old daughter on her own. The only thing that wasn't true was her tale of being molested, her initiation into the "lifestyle" – to use the chatroom parlance – that Paulina said she now wanted for her daughter. As Badolato had familiarized herself with the language and behaviors of the chatrooms, she'd honed that added criminal element, imagining what psychological conditions might believably lead a parent to traffic their own child and how those conditions could be grafted onto her real life story. She already had a history of abuse; it was not hard to extrapolate to a fictional stepfather who had seemed to provide a gentle counterpoint, showing her love and making her feel special when no one else had, even if others couldn't understand. From there, it was easy to convince the chatroom participants that she shared their belief – or justification – that most people had it all wrong and that "child love" was natural, and could even be beneficial for the child.

Badolato estimates that she has arrested more than a thousand people; not one of those arrests has failed to end in a conviction. She didn't know until she was in the thick of it that most agents refuse this sort of work, that most can't even pretend to forge a relationship with someone looking to victimize a child. But she could. "Paulina," she points out, is not a name she chose at random; it's similar to her own mother's name. Badolato says she had grown up learning to compartmentalize for the sake of her own emotional survival. She'd perfected the art of engaging with someone whose actions she couldn't stand. Doing this work had felt like a way of taking her trauma and putting it to good use, of leveraging her past as a safeguard against her daughter's and other children's futures.

Of course there were moments that were hard to take – when suspects mentioned which brands of lubrication were best or whether or not a parent might hold a child down. There were times when she knew that even talking about these things was a turn-on for these men, times when the conversations made her nauseous, times when she'd lie awake all night or play back a recording and think, "Holy shit, I listened to this? I said these words?" But she kept faith in the mission. She reminded herself that the pictures she sent of her daughter – the beautiful, little girl sleeping in the next room – did not represent a real child on offer. "I was thinking, 'If I send this obscure picture of my daughter and he acts on it, then he's never going to harm my daughter or anybody else's,' " Badolato says now. "I was presenting a fake girl to save a real one."

KYLE PARKS SEEMED to think he could get away with anything. He seemed to think, for instance, that he could get away with running a brothel, a 1-900 sex line, and a housecleaning company out of the same Columbus, Ohio, office park and under the same oxymoronic name, XXXREC and Hygiene Services. He seemed to think he could invite one young

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF NIKKI BADOLATO; COURTESY OF THE SUBJECT

woman and five teenagers (four of whom he had only just met) on a road trip to Florida, but instead deposit them in two rooms of a Red Roof Inn in St. Charles, Missouri. When they piled out of the minivan – high on the drugs he'd given them – saw snow falling and asked to be taken home, he thought he could make a little money off them first. All it took was a few ads in Backpage – the Craigslist of sex advertisements – and men began showing up.

Even after things started going south for him, Parks couldn't fathom that he wouldn't prevail. When someone alerted law enforcement as to what was going on, Parks (who, according to legal documents, had been out getting food when the police showed up) burst into the precinct the next morning looking to bail his "friend" out. When questioned about the 88 condoms found in the back of his van, he said they had been prescribed to him by a doctor. After being taken into custody, he protested that he was being set up. Most people would have cut their losses and pleaded guilty, but not Parks. He thought he could take his case to court and win.

And it wasn't impossible to imagine that he might. Badolato knew that even the tightest cases could go sideways when put before 12 people who would inevitably enter the courtroom with a cinematic sense of what sex trafficking was supposed to be. In fact, it wasn't just the jury that Badolato knew she would need to convince; it was also often the victims themselves, young people who had internalized the exact same misconceptions about trafficking that the jury had – along with any number of other judgments society had thrown their way – and who were loath to submit themselves to a courtroom full of more judgment.

Of all of Parks' underage victims, the hardest to pin down had been a 17-year-old we'll call Sierra. Once she returned to Columbus, Sierra seemed to basically disappear. Calls to her mother's number went unanswered. When one of the other victims managed to track her down in December 2016, a month before the case was to go to trial, Sierra agreed to meet Badolato on a blighted Columbus block with a string of dilapidated homes, climbing into the bureau's Chevy Malibu with matted hair, dirty clothes, and a wary expression.

By this time, Badolato had remarried, had a second child, relocated to St. Louis, and taken over as head of the Child Exploitation Joint Task Force, which had become one of the most productive FBI teams in the country in terms of arrests and convictions. Meanwhile, as the internet streamlined the process of buying or selling any good or service, trafficking had become one of the fastest-growing criminal enterprises, estimated by the Department of Homeland Security to bring in $150 billion globally and considered by many criminals to be a superior business model: If caught, the sentences were often lighter than those for peddling drugs; and unlike crack or heroin, the same product could be "used" again and again and again.

Badolato taught her team of 20 how to do the online undercover work she'd trailblazed in Atlanta, tracking the movements of child-abuse material through the online underworld and then prosecuting those who distributed and produced it. Her new squad also initiated her in the type of undercover work it had been doing before her arrival: covert sting operations in which a detective would pose as a john, set up a "date," and then meet said date in a hotel room fitted out with hidden recording devices while, in the next room over, a task-force team listened in, waiting for the code word that would let them know that enough evidence had been gathered for them to swoop in and shut the op down. This had proved a very effective technique for getting convictions, but Badolato's arrival coincided with both a growing sentiment that consensual sex work had been over-criminalized and an increasing awareness that what looked like consensual sex work might actually be trafficking, no matter what the "date" professed in that hotel room.

Badolato has a tendency to say aloud the things she notices – about you, about others, about situations – observations that are not at all unkind but are perceptive enough that most people would keep them to themselves. She points out when someone deflects, and she has a sharp eye for defense mechanisms. She once casually mentions my tendency to mirror other people's vocal and speech patterns. She is not shy about bringing up the emotional and physical abuse she says she experienced as a child, and she is quick to comment when someone is making excuses for someone else's behavior. It was soon clear to her colleagues that Badolato brought a trauma-informed mentality to the work, a tendency to look beyond what someone was doing and instead try to parse why they were doing it. And she was relentless: While some squads did one or two trafficking sting ops a year, her team was doing four or five a month. In addition to the hotel rooms reserved for the john and the team, they would have a social worker set up in a third room, ready to offer services to the victims. They would have lookouts stationed to see who might be dropping the date off. If that date was found to be underage, the case was automatically classified as trafficking. But even if they weren't, Badolato's team was primed to get to the bottom of what was going on, to figure out whether they were being manipulated or coerced, and by whom.

"If I could put my hands on a pimp, that's what I wanted," says Jeff Roediger, a St. Louis county detective who was the "john" for many of Badolato's sting ops and who makes clear that the team was not interested in policing voluntary sex work. "When I had those types of cases, and I knew they were being sincere with me, I wouldn't book them," he says. "It was all about talking to the girls. It's not like in the movies where they come running to you. You know, 'Thanks, you rescued me!' It's not like that. A lot of them try to bullshit you at first – 'That's my boyfriend, blah blah blah'– but once I talked to them for a while, they would become more forthcoming."

Badolato's unit was one of the first in the country to take on this "progressive and proactive" approach, as she puts it. Soon, St. Louis looked like a sex-trafficking capital – not because it was actually trafficking more victims than other cities but because the task force was so aggressively pursuing those cases, and classifying them as what they were. "I mean, I was working in vice for years," says Roediger. "Back in the day, it was always 'prostitution,' 'prostitution,' 'prostitution' – until we started to figure it out a little bit, until we started digging a little deeper."

Once they did, the task force found that roughly a third of the sex-trafficking victims they recovered were under the age of 17 – and they began to see the reach of the problem. Kids were being trafficked out of every hotel in the area, from the seediest roach motel to the fanciest Ritz-Carlton. They were being trafficked every time of day and by every socioeconomic group ("Before you go do brain surgery, you got to bust a nut real quick," one underage victim told Badolato of her high-end clientele). Some of the victims were girls. Some were boys. Some were LGBTQ kids who'd been kicked out of their homes. Some were straight cis kids from the suburbs. "I tell people that I could probably name two or three [kids] in the school district they live in that have been trafficked," Roediger says. "And they just can't comprehend it."

There were kids who were about to age out of foster care (a particularly at-risk group, according to those who work in the field), kids who'd run away, kids who were being sold to pay their family's rent, or to buy their family member's drugs. There were kids who'd sit in the hotel room, backpack at their feet, dutifully working on their math homework while agents and social workers tried to figure out what to do with them. Was their home life safe enough that they could be returned to it? Would a residential program take them? Of all the imperfect options, which would make them least likely to be trafficked again?

The one common denominator was this: They all had a vulnerability that could be preyed upon. They all lacked a safety net – societal, familial, emotional, or some combination thereof – that might have broken their fall. Mostly, their stories weren't dramatic; they were typical American tales of neglect, of abuse doled out casually, of a

> "If I can be perfectly honest, I truly don't believe that the FBI realizes what they put their agents through doing that kind of work."

steady stream of letdowns by people and institutions who should have propped them up. Badolato found that she had a knack for getting them to talk about this, for getting them to open up to her. She didn't look like an FBI agent – at least not what they'd imagined. She spoke softly, but with authority and a slight vocal fry. And she thinks that, at some level, they could probably sense that she'd once been a vulnerable kid too, that with only a few slightly different twists of fate, she could have become a trafficking victim herself – and that she knew it. "My trauma looks different than theirs, but it's trauma nonetheless," she says. "And I think victims can feel that."

AS THE TASK force learned more about the psychology of victims, they also learned more about the ways in which their vulnerability was being manipulated, and how those ways were evolving. It was known in law-enforcement circles that once a skilled trafficker set his or her sights on a vulnerable young person, they could be groomed in a matter of days: one day for an introduction, a day or two to make the victim feel special and cared for, and then the day when a "friend" comes over and he needs to be "cared for" as well. Sometimes violence was involved at that point; sometimes drug use was involved throughout. But emotional manipulation was the key element, which is why it was so easy for grooming to move online, for groomers to take advantage of the false senses of connection fostered on social media.

Of the victims who are not being trafficked by family members, the majority are being groomed in this way. "I would say that probably 75 percent of the initial grooming is happening online now," says Cindy Malott, the director of U.S. Safe Programs at Crisis Aid International. "Recruiters used to have to work really, really hard to get access to kids, but now they're practically sitting in a child's bedroom. And kids put everything out there – what's going on in their life, who they're angry about, parents are going through a divorce, their insecurities about their body, about themselves, what they do, how they spend their time – so it's like a gift to these predators."

The ways to manipulate are legion: Get a kid to send a compromising photo, and she'll do almost anything to keep you from sending it out to all her Facebook friends; find out a gay kid is still closeted, and the threat of outing him gives you incredible power. And predators aren't just on Instagram and Snapchat; they lurk in the chat functions of Roblox, *Minecraft*, *Grand Theft Auto*. "They're everywhere," says Malott. "People think, 'Oh, I just got to keep my kids away from those porn sites, those horrible places.' Well, no, predators are gonna go where the kids are." And once there, they're going to zero in on the kids who are most vulnerable.

That's what got to Badolato. In her online undercover work, she'd plumbed the psychology of pedophiles, but now she wasn't just dealing with suspects; she was spending time with victims and seeing the same vulnerabilities in them that the traffickers had seen: the instability or poverty, the addiction or mental health issues or abuse that had been normalized in their lives long before the traffickers entered them. Sometimes Badolato couldn't help but feel that all the conspiracies and misconceptions weren't just a distraction from the truth of trafficking but rather some sick attempt to let society off the hook for trying to solve the much more intractable problems at trafficking's root.

Badolato shakes hands with former FBI director Robert Mueller on the day she graduated from the academy in 2002.

COURTESY OF NIKKI BADOLATO

"People would rather stick their head in the sand than address the real problem, because then you have to face and talk about the societal issues," she says. "With a movie like *Sound of Freedom*, it's like, 'Oh, this is in a jungle in South America. This isn't actually in [my neighborhood].' You know? It's easier for people to ignore the problem than deal with the issues on a societal level."

BY THE TIME Badolato was sitting in that Chevy with Sierra, on that blighted Ohio block, she knew that the rate of revictimization for children who are trafficked was as high as 95 percent, according to FBI reports. She knew that 90 percent of sex-trafficking victims have a history of child sexual abuse, that more than 75 percent had lived in foster or adoptive care. She knew that she could arrest one perpetrator, and another would pop up in his place, that she could send one pimp to prison and the same victims would show up to stings some short time later, run by a different crew. She knew that testifying was a way for Sierra to psychologically push back against what had happened to her, and she was right: After the young woman took the stand on Jan. 10, 2017, Parks was found guilty and sentenced to 25 years; while testifying, Sierra had seemed to transform, to channel and embody a sort of empowerment. But Badolato also knew that once her testimony was over, Sierra would go back to that blighted block. She wondered how long that empowerment would last.

She also wondered about her own trajectory, her own ability to continue doing this work. The youngest trafficking victim she'd ever recovered from a sting op – an 11-year-old who'd been recruited through Facebook – had been returned to her family in a house that had no heat (Badolato had used an FBI slush fund to get it turned back on). One did not become immune to the human misery of such things. They compounded, became harder and harder to compartmentalize. "It's just a combination of all of those years – and it's all awful," she says. "But there are particular moments that, for one reason or another, you can't get out of your head. I just don't think it's in human nature to be exposed to that for so long and it not start changing who you are."

One night, at a restaurant near where Badolato lives, I ask her whether she thinks children are being sex-trafficked right then, in that very moment, in just the mile or two radius around us. She's quiet for a long time, her gaze fixed downward at her glass of wine. By the time she looks up, her whole body is trembling. "It's happening right now," she says quietly. "Right now some little girl is being dropped off in the parking lot of a motel. There are three or four girls holed up in a hotel next to a McDonald's. It's not only when we think about it. It is happening all the time. And if I'm just sitting here, present, having dinner, not thinking about it, that means I'm ignoring a problem that I know is real." Tears stream down her face.

"Many images have never left my mind," she says. "It's really hard to have worked your entire life in law enforcement with a lot of child crime victims and be at the end of your career looking at the situation where you realize you can only do so much to make a difference." Badolato wipes back the tears with the palm of her hand and shudders her head, as if she can shake the thoughts away. "Damn," she says. "Fuck. I shouldn't be the one crying. I'm not the victim of this." The veteran agent steels herself and repeats, "I am not the victim." [*Cont. on 81*]

BIG SUGAR, TOXIC FIRES

For more than a century, **sugar has shaped the lives of people in the Everglades and transformed the region**
By **Michael Adno** / Photographs by **Rose Marie Cromwell**

LONG THE RIM of Lake Okeechobee, the seasons aren't marked by temperature or falling leaves but by the humidity, light, and plumes of ash that blanket this part of Florida come October. Just as the air dries, the wind turns east and sugar-cane farmers set to harvesting stalks of cane across half a million acres in Florida, but before the stalks are cut, growers set their crops on fire. Burning is an easy way to eliminate the outer leaves of sugar cane and reduce costs. Every year from October until May, sometimes until June, the smoke haunts residents. Some claim it's killing them. Others write it off as a seasonal nuisance. But all of the residents in towns strung along the lake's southern edge know the resulting ash as black snow.

Driving through the small city of Pahokee, Ed Jones pointed out the window. "This is my home here," he said. There's the former Prince Theater, a beautiful but shuddered pink, art deco tomb. There's the break of sugar cane where Ed ran rabbits as a kid. There's the set of acres where he picked sweet corn, peas, and cabbages for decades. The fresh rows of black muck where he planted sugar cane each year. The packing houses, the mills he drove trucks to and from. The school where his granddaughter goes each day. The apartments he grew up in, one in Belle Glade where all the tenants shared a single bathroom. And hanging in the air as Jones ran through his life here, there was the acrid scent of burning sugar cane. He looked around at the edge of Belle Glade and said, "This is our town."

The more that Jones spoke, the weaker his voice grew. "I hate to say it, but it's awful," he said. "In the 70 years I've been here, it's changed for the worse, simply because they've opened more sugar mills. Farmers grow more cane, and there's more soot. It's that simple." Columns of smoke dotted the horizon. Soon, the smoke passed over the towns. The dim light resembled an eclipse.

For a century, sugar has grown here along the edge of Lake Okeechobee, becoming the state's third-largest source of agricultural revenue, according to the USDA, and making up more than half of America's domestic production. Sugar animates this part of Florida, which locals call "the Glades," where the economy relies almost solely on the industry. But a history of labor abuses, lawsuits aimed at growers, and the practice of burning that, according to a study, poses a health risk strains the relationship between many of the residents of the Glades and the sugar industry.

Compounding the story, the industry's foothold in the center of the historic Everglades that begins north of Lake Okeechobee and stretches south to the Gulf of Mexico makes it a principal impediment to Everglades restoration. Water that once flowed south from the lake through the Everglades and into the Gulf was diverted into thousands of canals to dry the land for farming. In turn, the effort not only remade the Everglades but remade ways of life for the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes who have lived there for centuries. It irrevocably altered the landscape to suit the agricultural interests and, in some cases, what's become colloquially known as "Big Sugar," a consortium of two companies and a farmer's cooperative.

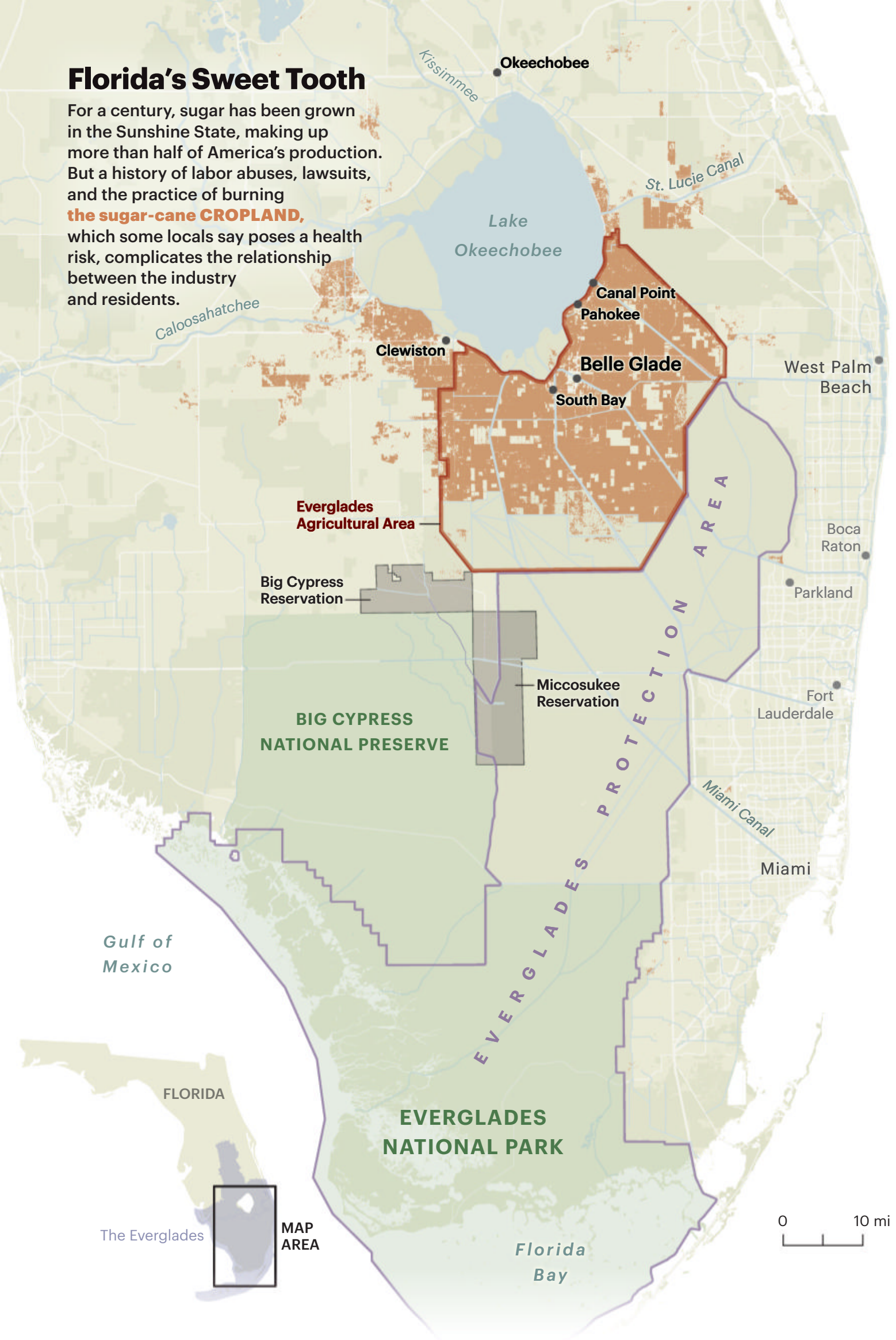
Today, Florida's sugar growers generate $3.4 billion annually, with more than 14,000 jobs in the state, according to the University of Florida. In just a century, it's grown from a nascent crop into a peerless one.

As we walked together, Ed Jones told me why this stretch of land will always remain central to his life. His story began

Reporter MICHAEL ADNO *is from Florida and writes for "The New York Times" and "The Bitter Southerner."*

Previous page: Fire and smoke from sugar-cane fields. This page: Ed Jones, his wife, Debra, and their granddaughter Madison

Debra Jones, like the rest of her family, suffers from asthma.



72 years ago, when his mother, a migrant farmworker, followed the summer harvest north to New Jersey, then headed south to work around Belle Glade until the summer harvest drew farmworkers back north.

By high school, Jones left social studies for the fields, following the same route his mother once did each year. In 1984, while picking sweet corn in Georgia, he met Debra at a family party. A year later, she moved with him to Belle Glade, and she remembered asking, "What is this stuff falling out the sky?"

"They burning cane," they told her as ash coated the city in a gray film. For the past 38 years, she composed her calendar around the smoke. Periodically, the house needed to be pressure-washed, the cars cleaned, air filters replaced. Immediately, Debra's allergies flared up. By Christmas, she learned how to use a nebulizer. In January, she needed an inhaler. "What have I gotten myself into?" she thought.

If there was any thread of solidarity in the Glades, based upon dozens of interviews, it's that many residents suffer from respiratory illnesses, some turning to a nebulizer three times every day. Many believe that the smoke either caused or exacerbated their symptoms. U.S. Sugar began publishing an annual "State of Our Air" report in 2020, dispelling the connection between the smoke and residents' health. And when we asked the company, it pointed to county-health rankings for air quality as well as a 2013 study by the Florida Department of Health regarding asthma. According to the company, the air was some of the "best ... in the state," and met all ambient air-quality standards.

In Pahokee, Jones felt there was nothing to show for a hundred years of growing cane, only a moribund town where most residents drove 40 minutes to shop at Walmarts in Clewiston, West Palm Beach, or Okeechobee. "We don't have nothing, nothing for the kids aside from football and baseball," he said. "That's what hurts me about Madison being raised in this area," Debra added of their granddaughter.

"There's no telling how many people around here got breathing conditions," Debra said. "But they never complain, because they need to work." And then softly, she said, "This is an agricultural town. I have to look at it this way: If they close the sugar mills, a lot of people will have no income."

Despite the omnipresence of sugar in the Glades, unemployment in the three counties where sugar predominantly grows remains among the highest in the state. And out of the roughly 40,000 residents that live among six towns in the Florida sugar belt, almost a third live in poverty, triple the national average. After residents in eastern Palm Beach County organized in 1991, the Florida Department of Agriculture outlawed the burning of sugar cane when the winds were west and carried smoke from the Glades toward the more affluent areas of Palm Beach County. Today, burns only occur when the winds are east, heading toward Pahokee, Belle Glade, and South Bay, towns that are overwhelmingly Black and Hispanic.

In 2021, *The Palm Beach Post* and ProPublica published a series of investigations that revealed how little the state's health departments had done to monitor the effect of particulate matter – an airborne pollutant linked to a long list of respiratory and cardiac symptoms as well as cancer – produced by the burns in the Glades. In what amounts to a swath of land roughly as big as Rhode Island, there is a single air monitor managed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. But for years, the monitor malfunctioned. It also used 24-hour averages to measure the amount of particulate matter in the air, sometimes obscuring the risk posed by smoke during pre-harvest burns. When asked about its harvest, U.S. Sugar, the largest grower of cane sugar in America, told ROLLING STONE in an email, "The people of U.S. Sugar stand firmly behind the integrity and safety of our farming practices; just like many of our fellow farmers who live and work on their family farms – we live here, we work here and raise our families here in these rural farming communities." In another document, U.S. Sugar claimed that "ash from burnt sugar cane is not a health risk."

However, in 2022, a study led by researchers at Florida State University and supported by NASA confirmed that smoke in the Glades contributed to premature deaths. Still, U.S. Sugar defends the practice of burning the crop as "safe."

And then, in 2023, Winrock International, a nonprofit devoted to agricultural issues, published a study that sugar-cane growers in the Glades accounted for more than 7.3 million metric tons of greenhouse-gas emissions each year – the same amount as 1.6 million cars. What was surprising is that more than 80 percent of those emissions were due to soil oxidation, while burning made up less than two percent. It placed Florida's sugar growers among the top 100 greenhouse-gas polluters in America. In a statement from Florida Crystals, representatives pointed to its status as the largest Regenerative Organic Cer-

MAP BY — **CHRISTINA SHINTANI**

MAP SOURCES: USDA NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SERVICE, FLORIDA NATURAL AREAS INVENTORY, FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, FWC-FWRI (FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION-FISH AND WILDLIFE RESEARCH INSTITUTE), AHED (ARC HYDRO ENHANCED DATABASE), SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA GEOPLAN CENTER, OPENSTREETMAP

Samuel Tommie spent the first years of his life being raised on an island in the Everglades.

tified farmland in America, outlining their goal to "increase carbon capture and store it." Ultimately, they said, they meant to "ensure our farms can supply safe, U.S.-grown foods for generations to come."

Among the dozens of residents we spoke with while reporting over the past two years, many felt there was no means to sway the sugar industry to harvest their crop without burning it, a practice known as green harvesting that's already taking place in sensitive sites near schools, hospitals, and major roads. But in other countries, like Brazil, which produces 20 times as much sugar, they've eliminated burning almost entirely after public pressure mounted. When U.S. Sugar was asked about a shift to green harvesting by *The Palm Beach Post*, the company acknowledged it would mean a "significant economic impact," but declined to offer details. In a written response to ROLLING STONE, U.S. Sugar said that "dealing with sugar cane growing and harvesting conditions is not a 'one-size-fits-all' proposition," before outlining how central the process was to the region and success of its annual harvest. In the case of Florida Crystals, a source from the company claimed

"THERE'S NO TELLING HOW MANY PEOPLE AROUND HERE GOT BREATHING CONDITIONS," SAYS ONE LOCAL. "BUT THEY NEED WORK."

it was considering green harvesting and using biomass to power mills and even manufacture packaging with it.

Back on Ed Jones' porch in Pahokee, he showed me a green nebulizer shaped like a frog – his granddaughter's. Out front, a sign planted in the ground read, "A Pahokee High Honor Student Lives Here." In the following days, the humidity dropped. East winds blew into the Glades just as thousands of acres of sugar cane burned. The smoke drew across the center of Florida like a sheet, and the Jones family could no longer sit on the porch. Ed Jones bent forward, his head dropping between his shoulders, and asked, "What can I do against a big corporation?"

SUGAR ROSE AS the Glades' North Star over the past century, when America's sweet tooth and a storm galvanized the industry's place here. At the back end of the 1920s, two hurricanes lashed Florida; the latter one killed more than 2,500 people living along Lake Okeechobee's southern rim in 1928. In the storm's wake, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers encased the lake with a 40-foot-tall dike, drastically altering the ecology of South Florida. In the next century, engineering projects would move enough earth to erect a mountain in the Everglades, and made large-scale farming possible.

By 1931, Charles Stewart Mott bought the bones of the Southern Sugar Corp. after it went bankrupt. He renamed the company the United States Sugar Corp. In 1948, Congress carved out the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) south of the lake, giving the industry a permanent home in the Everglades one year

Farmers and locals have to work and live with the smoke from the fields.

after the Everglades National Park opened. And then a decade later, Alfonso and Jose Fanjul fled Fidel Castro's Cuba when rebels nationalized their family's home, their land, and took all that belonged to them, including 150,000 acres and 10 mills. In 1959, Alfonso Fanjul Sr. bought 4,000 acres in the EAA, built a mill along the lake, and began to reassemble what they'd lost. That same year, America incentivized sugar growers, embargoing imports from Cuba, and the industry took shape.

Today, there are three threads that make up Florida's sugar industry. The first is U.S. Sugar, the company that Mott resurrected. Collectively, U.S. Sugar owns more than 245,000 acres in Florida. The second is Florida Crystals, the company that the Fanjuls built. As of this year, they own 190,000 acres in Florida, and their parent company has a minority stake in a company that owns 240,000 in the Dominican Republic, as well as refineries and mills in four states and seven countries that belong to a subsidiary, ASR Group (American Sugar Refining). The third thread is composed of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, which farms 73,000 acres, belongs to 43 growers, and sells its raw sugar to ASR. And despite the limited number of growers, the industry's power extends well beyond the borders of the Everglades.

SUGAR-CANE GROWERS IN THE GLADES ACCOUNTED FOR OVER 7.3 MILLION METRIC TONS OF GREENHOUSE-GAS EMISSIONS EACH YEAR — EQUAL TO 1.6 MILLION CARS.

During the 2020 election cycle, Big Sugar gave more than $11 million to federal candidates. And between 1994 and 2021, the industry spent more than $65 million in state elections alone. The resources

devoted toward lobbying are dizzying, and it's why Big Sugar has become synonymous with power in Florida and in federal agricultural policy. Its influence largely focuses on two issues. One is galvanizing America's sugar program into the Farm Bill. The second is retaining its ability to grow sugar in the center of the historic Everglades and continue to burn the crops pre-harvest, which U.S. Sugar deems essential.

That's why the story of sugar farming is inextricably bound to the restoration of the Everglades. From the foot of Orlando, the Everglades forms like a finger dipping into the subtropics before stretching across all of South Florida. It begins as a drip in the Kissimmee River Valley and falls south into a series of lakes, then rivers, before it reaches Lake Okeechobee, the 10th-largest lake in the U.S. On the eastern edge, the St. Lucie River carries water into the Atlantic, and along its western rim, the Caloosahatchee into the Gulf. South of those rivers, the Everglades extends from coast to coast, forming a shallow 60-mile-wide and 100-mile-long attenuated river running into Florida Bay. It carves through plains and deep sloughs, and where the land rises by inches, cypress and pond apple swamps grow before reaching flatwoods along the coastal ridges that are home to Naples and Miami.

From top: Planting sugar cane. "Sonny" Stein, a fourth-generation farmer, says, "It's not as fun as it used to be."

For centuries, mystery remained central to the Everglades. Initially, cartographers deemed it impenetrable. The Spanish called it "Lake of the Holy Spirit." Indigenous tribes called it "Pahokee," meaning grassy water. Later, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas lent it the indelible name "The River of Grass." In the past century, more than half of the Everglades were developed for agricultural and residential use as Florida's population grew. And acre by acre, America lost a wilderness the size of Connecticut.

LATE IN THE summer, less than 40 miles west of Miami, a curtain of rain hung to the east as Samuel Tommie pored over a set of maps. He was trying to make it to one of his family's tree islands set against the edge of the Big Cypress National Pre-

serve south of Florida's sugar bowl. There are thousands of these family lands floating among the veins of sweet water and saw grass. For centuries they've been passed from generation to generation in the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes. Tommie sat in the cab of a purple airboat, filming with a camcorder as his friend carved through the estuarine maze. After nearly 30 minutes, we reached an island hidden behind a wall of tall grass. As we reached the dock, a torrent of rain chased us underneath a chickee not unlike the one Tommie grew up beneath six decades ago.

Raised by his grandparents on a tree island in Shark Valley, an area only 30 miles west of Miami, Tommie came of age in pristine wilderness. But today, at 67, the plants he knew as a kid have vanished. "I don't see them anymore," he said. The sky, once punctuated by the silhouettes of birds, is empty. Noises he knew intimately were gone. "Politics is what changed the environment," he told me. "We're talking about our ways of life."

Tommie has collected a lot of names. Often, it's artist or activist. Sometimes, it's communist or terrorist, he joked. He was once employed by the tribe in its Environmental Resource Management Department, and later learned the backcountry as an airboat guide. Recently, he's been returning to many of those places trying to form a record of what the Everglades once was and what it's become. As he said, "I was born on those islands."

Those changes were marked first by a century-old campaign to drain the Everglades to create farmland, and then by the engineering projects meant to restore the flow of water south. But as agriculture and residential development throughout the state grew, it was the concentration of nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen running off fields and lawns north of the lake that exacerbated the decline.

Some places south of the EAA that were once wet year-round were now often dry. Animals and plants central to Seminole culture disappeared. Soon, the tribe's ability to retain their cultural practices winnowed. "Agriculture to the north dramatically affected the reservation," said Jessica Cattelino, a Seminole historian at UCLA. "They were vulnerable – with no say and no recourse – to others' decisions about water."

For decades, the agricultural industry's influence on policy persuaded regulators to put water where it wanted when it wanted. They could irrigate their crops when it was dry or back-pump water to keep them from drowning in the wet season. The tree islands were central to Seminole history as the places that helped them survive three wars with America. Now, with the inundation of water and nutrient pollution, tree islands were disappearing due to high water levels, while some parts of the Everglades that were once wet year-round were experiencing drought. "It made a major impact on the natural order of things," Tommie said. This meant not just a loss of place but the loss of plants critical for ceremonies, less wildlife, and ultimately a loss of identity. As Cattelino told me, "Seminole sovereignty is inextricably tied to the Everglades ecosystem."

A few weeks earlier, I followed Tommie and Quenton Cypress, who worked for the tribe's Heritage and Environment Resources Office, into the woods near the Big Cypress Reservation. Bundles of palmetto fell off into tea-colored water. The delicate flowers of yellow top brushed against cones of goldenrod. Stands of slash pine marched toward cypress domes just beginning to turn amber as fall arrived. Like Tommie, Cypress, who grew up on the Big Cypress Reservation, remembers a wilder place. "There used to be way more," he said. "More trees." With his three children in mind, he said, "They're going to inherit a whole different area.... What we had cannot be brought back."

THE SOIL ALONG the border of Lake Okeechobee is a touch past black and known as "muck." In the autumn light, the contrast between the furrows of muck and the lime oceans of cane glow. Paul Allen, a farmer from Pahokee, looks out over an acre just outside town as a crew of men from Mexico set to planting sugar, tossing canes from the bed of a trailer.

Ed Jones holds up a photo of his sister (left) and mother in the fields.

Just like Ed Jones, Paul Allen's affection for the place runs deep. His father moved to the Glades from Hardee County on the west side of Okeechobee, where he worked in packing houses. In high school, Allen got a job scrubbing celery boxes in the packing houses of South Bay. Later, Allen's career led him to R.C. Hatton, which grew sweet corn, cabbages, and sugar cane. In 2007, he became a partner in the operation. Today, Hatton owns more than 12,000 acres and a portion of the packing house where Allen scrubbed boxes as a kid.

When Allen started farming, there were probably twice as many farmers. They were folks that understood the slant of light that fell across Florida, the outsize effect of weather in the subtropics, folks who could grow anything. He says the work to him was about feeding the country, and the perception of farmers as complicit in the degradation of the environment and the issue of burning stung. It was a complicated dance between residents alleging that the destruction of the Everglades was due to the influence of the sugar industry without also acknowledging the decades of drainage that preceded the crop or the role population growth played.

Those questions hung over Allen each day as he drove between his office in downtown Pahokee and the fields he tends. Everything he ever had or will have was bound up in this land. For some, the undulating tendrils of cane were a visual metaphor for the destruction of the Everglades, a precursor to the smoke that came each year. For Allen, that crop was what he devoted his life to. "In the beginning," he said, "it was just a way to provide for my family."

In 1914, Hans Stein boarded a barge on the west side of Okeechobee bound for the Glades. He'd sold everything after he got word from a family member about some fertile land south of the lake. He arrived there in a little settlement called Chosen – what predated Belle Glade – and began to place seeds in the ground. Four generations later, his great-grandson, Fritz "Sonny" Stein III, was still farming that same ground, growing sugar cane on less than 1,000 acres.

"It's not as fun as it used to be," Stein said. "Put it that way." As we spoke, he told me about the 360 acres his father once sold to clear debts, the winnowing profit margins, and the five family members they lost to the 1928 hurricane. "Everything just washed away," he told me. Today, Stein isn't sure how much longer independent farmers might hang on in the Glades due to the added cost. "All the rules have changed," he said. "It's getting tougher for the small guy. America needs to wake up and look at the farmers in a different light. They're not making land anymore." In the past two decades, growers had made significant changes in the way they grew and harvested sugar cane. Stein felt the industry could and would adapt to green harvesting. "It's a whole lot harder to cultivate," he said. "But that's going to be our next challenge."

BENEATH A CHICKEE hut along the Tamiami Trail just east of the Miccosukee Tribe's reservation, Michael Frank, a tribal elder, led me through a history of the tribe's relationship to sugar cane and to the state. He remembered when his family stopped eating fish due to the high levels of mercury. He remembered when the tree islands that he grew up on flooded even during the dry season. "Deer are not made to live in aquariums," he said. "You can blame sugar for the rest of your life," he added. "They have their part, but you've got your part, too."

In October 1988, Dexter Lehtinen, then the U.S. attorney general for the Southern District of Florida, quietly filed a lawsuit in Miami. It alleged that the state of Florida violated federal water standards and damaged the Everglades National Park by allowing polluted water from farms to flow directly into the park. The lawsuit set limits for harmful nutrients like phosphorus. Without those set limits, environmental scientists believed the southern Everglades would have met a certain and cruel death.

Smoke from the burning of the sugar-cane harvest lingers over homes.

By 1992, Lehtinen became general counsel for the Miccosukee Tribe. (In 2011, it sued him.) Together, they helped reverse decades of water management meant to serve agriculture. Regulators and growers were compelled by the courts to build thousands of acres of water-treatment areas. Ultimately, they established the most stringent water-quality standard in America. In Michael Grunwald's book *The Swamp*, he wrote, "The vigilance of the Miccosukees has been responsible for some of this success; the Everglades saved their ancestors, and they have helped to return the favor."

In 2012, a Miccosukee polymath named Houston Cypress met a friend for a drink in a haunt off LeJeune Road in Miami. That night, Cypress and Jean Sarmiento outlined the Love the Everglades Movement, a nonprofit that guided groups in the Everglades, hosted events, and organized protests. Their idea was straightforward: If people fell in love with the Everglades, they might try to protect it. Cypress echoed Frank's sentiment about where culpability lied. "Agriculture is a problem," they said, but they still felt there was some way for the farmers to provide for their families without harming the tribe's. As to sugar's role, Cypress acknowledged how growers cut down their runoff, and regardless of how much they've done, "people are still beating up on them when they've improved a lot. That needs to be noted."

Since 1996, growers in the EAA have reduced the amount of pollution streaming from their fields by an average of 57 percent, sometimes doubling what's required by law. Growers were forced to eliminate the practice of back-pumping water into Lake Okeechobee by regulators, and the companies cooperated to carve out tracts of land for water-treatment areas and a reservoir. (They later sued the Army Corps over its construction.) According to Florida Crystals, more than $300 million has been steered toward restoration projects by growers in the EAA through a "one-of-a-kind" agricultural privilege tax, while U.S. Sugar claimed more than $450 million. Of course, those shifts in best management practices started with Lehtinen and the Miccosukee, and in some cases, the growers had no choice.

"POLITICS IS WHAT CHANGED THE ENVIRONMENT," AN ACTIVIST SAYS. "WE'RE TALKING ABOUT OUR WAYS OF LIFE."

"One of the most meaningful things me and my friends and family can do to save the Everglades is just to keep our cultural practices going," Cypress said. "Because we can talk about sovereignty as a legal theory and concept, but being able to maintain the garden, that's where true sovereignty is."

AS THE DAYS grew shorter, and the afternoon rains so central to South Florida disappeared, the burns in the Glades continued. By Christmastime, the Joneses woke up to black snow falling along the lake's edge from Pahokee down to South Bay. Growers in Palm Beach County burned 1,840 acres that day. "It just didn't feel like Christmas," said Debra Jones. Her breathing problems were growing worse. Ed was preparing for a procedure to treat his bladder cancer, which unnerved her. And their granddaughter began considering just where she planned to go to college, maybe the University of Florida in Gainesville or Florida State in Tallahassee. "At this point, I don't know what we'll do," Debra said. "There's just soot falling everywhere. But I know one thing: We cannot keep living like this."

As the season wore on, sugar growers burned the fields past May and into June, and the smoke returned. Despite the Jones family's deep roots in Pahokee, raising their kids and grandkids here, Debra told me she would pick up and leave tomorrow if she could. Her granddaughter said she didn't plan to come back from school other than to visit them, and it stung. As she told Debra, "There's nothing here." For months I thought of Ed Jones, his hands pointing to the fields he tended to for decades, the fields his mother worked, how when we turned onto the main artery of pavement connecting all of the Glades' towns, he told me proudly, "This is my home."

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Reviews

Music

KALI UCHIS BLOOMS BRIGHTER

The silky-voiced singer finds new inspiration on her second Spanish-language album

By JULYSSA LOPEZ

Kali Uchis
Orquídeas
GEFFEN

FEW ARTISTS can set a scene like Kali Uchis. Each of her albums has proven that she's a master of mood boards and a queen of aesthetics: Her 2018 debut album, *Isolation,* was a lush world of retro R&B best enjoyed on a heart-shaped couch; 2023's *Red Moon in Venus* included cosmic, shape-shifting pop songs to be drunk up during a lunar eclipse. Across each project, she's stitched disparate sonic textures together like fabric swatches and placed her voice front and center – allowing it to gently guide her listeners to whatever new world she was building.

In true Kali fashion, her new album, *Orquídeas,* started with a specific vision: "This album is inspired by the timeless, eerie, ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Débora Islas

KALI UCHIS

mystic, striking, graceful, and sensual allure of the orchid," she said in a press release that reads more like poetry. The orchid, it turns out, is the national flower of Colombia, where Uchis spent a lot of time as a kid. "I always felt distinctly intrigued and magnetized by the flower." The goal across the record, Uchis continued, is to harness that imagery to "redefine the way we look at Latinas in music."

Quickly on *Orquídeas*, it becomes clear Uchis has a few things in mind: First of all, she wants the world to know there's no box or category to limit Latinas sonically. She bounces from icy R&B to bright merengue to liquefied dream pop. Second, the album balances a careful mix of power and vulnerability, one that adds complexity and nuance to notions of Latinas in music that often involve stereotypes as lusty sirens or spicy firebrands.

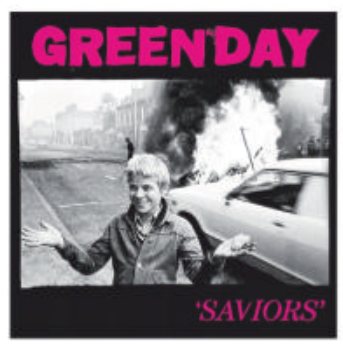
Take, for example, "Igual Que un Ángel," a synth-pop ode to female autonomy. "She just wants peace.... She never forgets what's real," she sings in Spanish. When it's less expected, Mexican star Peso Pluma pops onto the track, emphasizing Uchis' message of tenacity. "Perdiste" is a glowing ballad that tenderly reminds an ex-lover of the woman he's lost, while "Te Mata" is a reclamation of independence after a toxic relationship, beautifully crafted into a modern-day bolero. It's one of the most stunning vocal performances by Uchis, who showed her knack for re-creating old-school classics when she interpreted La Lupe's burning "Què Te Pedí" on her first Spanish-language album, 2020's *Sin Miedo (del Amor y Otros Demonios)*.

But *Orquídeas* is also loaded with sexual agency and bad-bitch energy. "Labios Mordidos," the album's centerpiece, is an empowerment anthem that enlists her fellow Colombian Karol G for a glossed-out *perreo* party. On the discoed-out "No Hay Ley Parte 2," she exchanges come-hither lyrics with Rauw Alejandro, then cranks up the energy on "Muñekita" for a splash of dembow, featuring Dominican luminary El Alfa and City Girls rapper JT.

Across the album, Uchis is bolder and more forthright than on past releases. So often, she's played the languid cool girl, but she breaks out of her shell again and again this time out. She dives deeper into new sounds, and she flourishes the entire way. ®

GREEN DAY'S GROWN-UP PUNK

The band's 14th album has huge songs and snotty satire for a world on fire By KORY GROW



Green Day
'Saviors'
Reprise

Green Day's Mike Dirnt, Armstrong, and Tré Cool (from left)

MORE THAN three decades ago, Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong was sarcastically singing "Welcome to Paradise." Now at age 51, he's staidly singing, "Welcome to my problems," on "Dilemma," a plaintive, swinging rocker on Green Day's 14th LP, *'Saviors,'* which owes a debt to Fifties rock and the Ramones. "I was sober, now I'm drunk again," he wails in the chorus. "I'm in trouble and in love again/I don't want to be a dead man walking." It's one of the album's best songs, and as another pop-punk trio once put it, well, I guess this is growing up.

After all, "aging punk band" might be the most oxymoronic phrase in music. But Green Day, much like combat rockers the Clash, long ago figured out the path to mainstream salvation was leaning away from punk and into their big-box influences while satirizing the world at large. That approach made the Bay Area trio punk's biggest-ever band, and it's Armstrong's alternating earnestness and sarcasm, combined with some typically hummable tunes, that makes *'Saviors'* something of a return to form for Green Day, who drifted a little too far into pop territory on 2020's *Father of All Motherfuckers*.

Since merry melodies have always been their forte, "1981" is particularly memorable with its chorus – "She's gonna bang her head like 1981" – even if Armstrong's lyrics about slam-dancing in acid rain read, like, totally gnarly. (Armstrong has always had a knack for fluffing up puerile lyrics with smart chord changes.) "Coma City" and "Corvette Summer" are both big rock songs for the sake of big rock.

Armstrong's lyrics fall into three categories: songs about growing up ("Dilemma," the acoustic dad-rock ditty "Father to a Son"), silly songs about nothing ("One Eyed Bastard" is a *Sopranos*-esque goombah rocker that has refrains of "Bada-bing, bada-bing"), and, of course, heaps of social commentary. Some of it is amusing – the conservative satire "The American Dream Is Killing Me," the proud bisexuality of "Bobby Sox," a dig at "assholes in space" bankrupting the planet on "Coma City." But Armstrong misses his target on "Living in the '20s" when he sounds a little too blithe singing about the deadly 2021 King Soopers mass shooting in Colorado.

Still, Green Day have always been less about actual activism and more about laughing while the world around them burns. That attitude has made them survivors in the hazardous profession of punk rock, and they know it. "Everybody's famous, stupid, and contagious," they sing, sending up Nirvana on album closer "Fancy Sauce," "as we all die young someday." But what's impressive about *'Saviors'* is how they've gotten (mostly) better with age. ®

FROM TOP: ALICE BAXLEY; MADISON HURLEY

BREAKING

Willi Carlisle's Openhearted Folk

WILLI CARLISLE has been barnstorming the country the past few years with his righteous, roving accordion-folk tales about van life, borderlands cattle ranching, and cheap cocaine. But the Illinois/Kansas-raised singer-songwriter truly levels up on *Critterland,* his latest album, recorded with roots legend Darrell Scott. These richly rendered songs mix harrowing heartland reportage on sobriety, suicide, and Ozark drug rings with openhearted tales of grief, fatherhood, and packing bowls in a Tennessee Bojangles. The result is a beautiful folk document of American reckoning and redemption. **JONATHAN BERNSTEIN**

Foster and Reis scan the ice for clues.

THE REBIRTH OF 'TRUE DETECTIVE'

The fourth season of HBO's neo-noir delivers a gripping Arctic Circle mystery thanks to Issa López, Jodie Foster, and Kali Reis

ALAN SEPINWALL

True Detective: Night Country

NETWORK	HBO
AIR DATE	Jan. 14
STARRING	Jodie Foster Kali Reis John Hawkes Finn Bennett Fiona Shaw Christopher Eccleston Isabella Star LaBlanc

LIZ DANVERS, chief of police in the remote Alaska town of Ennis, and heroine of *True Detective: Night Country,* is fond of telling other cops they're asking the wrong questions, prodding them over and over until they ask the right one. With *Night Country,* there's only one question: Was it worth resurrecting the long-dormant *True Detective* franchise – and without its original creator, Nic Pizzolatto?

The new season, created, directed, and largely written by Issa López (*Tigers Are Not Afraid*), and starring Jodie Foster, answers with a resounding, "Hell, yes."

It's been a decade since the anthology cop drama's first season, starring Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson. In the moment, it seemed like a bolt from the blue, thanks primarily to McConaughey's haunted performance and the hypnotic direction of Cary Joji Fukunaga. But the ending disappointed viewers who were expecting some kind of supernatural payoff to all of the vague allusions to the horror stories of H.P. Lovecraft. Season Two, starring Colin Farrell and Rachel McAdams, was a creative disaster on nearly every front. The third season was buoyed by the performances of Mahershala Ali and Stephen Dorff, but was otherwise a forgettable rehash.

Now comes a new title, a new creator, and a very different setting, 150 miles north of the Arctic Circle. *Night Country* injects a whole lot of female energy both onscreen – in the form of Foster and co-star Kali Reis, as Danvers' reluctant partner Evangeline Navarro – and off, into a series that in the past wasn't exactly celebrated for its use of women. The end result is a lean, mean, six-episode season that retains most of what was great under Pizzolatto, while leaving behind the more self-indulgent or outright clumsy parts of those years.

Night Country begins with Ennis entering a winter stretch of perpetual darkness. The plot – Arctic researchers disappear under mysterious circumstances, which Navarro believes is connected to an unsolved murder she once worked on with Danvers – has plenty of darkness of its own. Yet López manages to avoid letting the show be consumed by that darkness. It's an intense, often graphically violent season, but not an oppressively dour one. The energy between Foster (whose raspy growl is a perfect fit for an antisocial, my-way-or-the-highway veteran cop) and Reis (a former boxer with screen presence to spare) crackles throughout. And López manages to occasionally let some small but badly needed glimpses of light shine through, particularly when it comes to Navarro and everyone else in Ennis telling Danvers how much they dislike her.

López on the set

After Season One, Pizzolatto admitted he was surprised by how literally some viewers took the Yellow King references, and the next two seasons mostly tried to stick to human monsters. López, on the other hand, almost gleefully accepts the challenge of telling her story in a way that allows the audience to either take what's happening as evidence that powerful spirits roam the ice up there, or treat all of the strange doings as products of the madness that can develop in such isolated, lightless conditions. When a witness is asked if he thought there was another person at a crime scene, he says, "This is Ennis, man. Yeah, you see people sometimes." It's an incredibly graceful balancing act, all the way to the end.

The Ali season came and went with minimal notice, and there hasn't been much clamoring for more over the past five years. But López makes a very convincing argument that *True Detective* can live on, passing from one storyteller to the next rather than rotely copying what's been done with it before. By the time someone directly quotes a McConaughey line in the finale, *Night Country* has already established itself as its own thrilling, nightmarish, rivetting thing.

MICHELE K. SHORT/HBO; LILJA JONS/HBO

[*Cont. from 25*] a narrow, winding road through the redwood forests. He tells me he trekked uphill more than four miles to his family's home in Last Chance. And as he walked, Bevirt remembers, "I dreamed of building something to fly home in." He meant it.

Despite that long walk, he speaks to me about his childhood with unabashed reverence: "I was the receptacle of so much good fortune." To his mind, his luck included living without electricity or a phone. His and other counterculture families moved to Last Chance to break loose from American society and live communally amid the redwoods and meadows. Bevirt says his family "lived off the grid before it was cool to live off the grid. We had kerosene lamps and candlelight. We didn't even have a telephone. I took care of the animals and worked in the garden. If you wanted water, you had to pump the water." He says it instilled "a deep passion for sustainability."

Anything he wanted as a child his parents said he could have. But he had to earn the money to pay for half of it or build it himself. So when he wanted a mountain bike, he built it – with full suspension before other bike makers thought of it. "As a kid, I became fascinated with computers," he recalls, "so I needed to figure out how to get electricity in." These childhood engineering projects gave him the confidence needed for tackling bigger challenges.

When he left Last Chance, he kept thinking of a flying machine. As an undergrad at UC Davis, he made his first coursework stab at engineering an electric aircraft. But batteries weren't powerful enough yet. And anything driven by aviation fuel, he says, would have been "horribly loud. I didn't feel it was workable." He put his dream on hold.

Not long after getting a master's in mechanical engineering at Stanford, he founded a successful laboratory-robotics company. Eventually he sold it for a big payout. He also started and later sold a company selling his invention, the Gorillapod, a hugely popular articulating camera tripod. Today, Bevirt holds more than 150 patents and pending applications on his many inventions.

Rechargeable batteries gradually grew more powerful until Bevirt decided to go back to that dream of flying. With his own capital, he started up Joby 15 years ago in a workshop he set up with a handful of other engineers in an airy redwood building near his house.

At the time, along with Ospreys, the military was flying runway-takeoff drones, and the first handheld civilian drones, little more than toys, were just hitting the market. But no working model for an eVTOL designed for carrying people existed. So, starting from scratch, they designed, built, and tested countless iterations of virtually every eVTOL component, from batteries, microcomputers, and controls to electric motors, propeller blades, fuselage, and wing and rotor configurations. "Because I didn't come from traditional aviation," he says, "it allowed me to think outside of the box." Then they assembled the parts into scores of radio-controlled scale models and watched them fly.

We drive down a ski-slope steep, rutted dirt road from his house through the towering trees until arriving at a former quarry pit. This is where Joby set up testing for tethered flights of the early scale models. Joby still tinkers with its propeller blades at the bottom of the quarry. I watch a single blade spinning while suspended on a wheeled trolley racing around a track. Acoustic tests at the site measure the sound the blade generates.

By 2015, Joby flew a smaller version of its basic eVTOL design for the first time. In 2017, a full-scale model took to the skies. And in 2020, Toyota became Joby's biggest outside investor to date, ponying up almost $400 million. At present, according to Bevirt, Joby has the potential to produce tens of eVTOLs a year. He wanted Toyota as a partner, he explains, because of the Japanese company's global reputation for turning out vast numbers of reliable cars.

Aircraft manufacturers such as Airbus, Boeing, Cessna, and Sikorsky assemble their jets and helicopters mostly from parts engineered and produced for them by suppliers. Those firms then sell their products to airlines, militaries, and private buyers. Joby integrates all aspects of engineering and manufacturing – from microcomputers to propeller blades, as well as some of the robots that assemble components that go into the finished aircraft. But Joby wants to automate some of the manufacturing processes to turn out aircraft at a pace more like terrestrial cars.

"The piece I'm ecstatic about," Bevirt says, "is all the manufacturing processes we put in place to build conforming parts" – that is, like a modern robotic auto-assembly plant. "We now have what we need to turn the dial" to produce components and assemble aircraft quickly enough to drive costs way down.

Bevirt won't tell me how much the handful of aircraft the company has built to date cost, but he says the long-term goal is to get the cost to around a million dollars each. At the Joby assembly plant in Marina, I see Toyota engineers working alongside Joby personnel to develop automated ways to start turning out a projected 500 air taxis each year in the company's factory, which Bevirt announced in October will soon go up near Dayton, Ohio.

Another Silicon Valley electric-air-taxi firm, Archer Aviation, is taking the more traditional route, assembling its Midnight eVTOL mainly from off-the-shelf components. By doing so, the company says, it will get into the air-taxi business faster and at a lower cost per aircraft than competitors like Joby.

Archer founder and CEO Goldstein says he wants 6,000 Midnights flying by 2030. But Archer has yet to fly its Midnight beyond a hover and, like Joby and Volocopter, faces significant regulatory hurdles before gaining FAA certification to fly commercially.

Goldstein thinks the pathway to success will be straightforward: Just swap the helicopter for the Midnight. "To start putting these things into service isn't so crazy," he says. "We are just swapping equipment that's safer and quieter." He explains that if the single motor or gearbox on a helicopter fails, the chopper can go down. But, he claims, on the Midnight every critical system has duplicates that will keep it flying even if any of them fail. And because electric motors have very few moving parts and no gearbox at all, he insists, "the odds of equipment failure are very low."

Goldstein also points out that passenger helicopters can cost anywhere from $500,000 to many millions of dollars and at least $300 an hour to fly. At those prices, it's little wonder that, he claims, "the average American takes one or fewer helicopter flights in their lifetime." But Archer partner United plans to fly even those who aren't members of *Succession*'s Roy family. "We do want to put a lot of planes in the sky that are way safer than a car at a cost lower than a car to operate," adds Goldstein. Maybe they won't only fly the Roys of the world, but the day when we can all afford to get around by air turns out to be a long way off.

About a month after my time with Bevirt in California, I attend a public conversation between him and Ed Bastian, CEO of Joby airline partner Delta, at a New York City tech-entrepreneur and investor forum. From the rooftop balcony of a chic riverside hotel hosting the event in Brooklyn, I watch helicopters flying over a twinkling Lower Manhattan and across the East River, probably ferrying their passengers to LaGuardia and JFK airports, or perhaps out to estates in the Hamptons.

Like those posh rides, Bastian says of the Joby air taxis, "the early days we'll have it as a premium service." He anticipates that business-class ticket holders will book a Joby ride on the Delta app – just like they now do with Lyft rideshares. He eventually wants the Joby air taxi to take his passengers right to their flight at the airport, so that they can walk straight on board. But until costs come down, those who don't have front-of-the-airliner tickets will still have to fight traffic and stand in the TSA line.

It's easy to imagine how this innovation could be just another thing that divides the rich from the ordinary traveler even more. That is, for those who will trust them.

"Will people get on this airplane? I don't think you can reliably survey the question," Brian Yutko, CEO of Boeing's air-taxi company Wisk, tells me. "You can't get accurate data because it's hard for people to imagine." But he points out that 20 years ago few people imagined they would one day dial up an Uber or Lyft. Now, of course, millions of people get around in rideshares every day.

But there is a familiarity to Ubers and Lyfts – they use old-fashioned cars and operate like regular taxis.

Completely rethinking how we use our skies will take time. Just look at the slow and rocky rollout of self-driving cars – and those are using existing infrastructure. And, while not the virtual free-for-all of city streets, urban air space changes unpredictably and, potentially, without notice. Trees grow, construction cranes rise, wind turbines spin, power lines get stretched, new structures go up all of the time.

And what happens if an air taxi crashes into a high-rise or a battery bursts into flames midair? While commercial air travel is by far the safest form of transportation, many people are already scared of flying. "One major urban crash," former NTSB chair Hart contends, "could result in termination or at least lengthy suspension of the entire industry." The crunch of an air taxi hitting the ground might crash the whole business. Many people who now refuse to fly in small airplanes and helicopters because of their spotty safety records will need lots of convincing before they opt to fly in eVTOLs.

And will they even consider the versions with no driver at all? "I intend to be the first person to fly on this airplane," says Yutko, who contends Wisk is on track to start its pilotless air-taxi service sometime before 2030. "It has to be safe, just safe."

As I sit with Bevirt earlier at his house amid the fragrant redwoods, moist Pacific Ocean air, and Santa Cruz Mountain stillness, he looks ahead at all of the challenges. He sees flying cars and air taxis as more than just a faster way to get from place to place. "As an engineer," he says, "I care about getting people there as safely, efficiently, and quickly as possible. But I think there's a lot of opportunity to see the beauty of the world from above."

At one point, with a laugh, he quotes me a line from *Back to the Future*: "Where we're going, we don't need roads."

[*Cont. from 43*] "So where do you keep the rest of them?" I ask.

"Everywhere," Savage says.

"And he not even joking," Meezy adds. "Just different areas that he trusts. I bought him a car for his birthday – it's still at the studio."

Savage spots Kar's two rare motorcycles across the room. The first is a Ducatti Panigale V4 S Corse, a limited luxury bike running around $30,000. Savage has a Panigale V2 back home, a slightly newer version. The other is a Ducati 998, a working model of a bike from *The Matrix Reloaded*. Savage mounts the Panigale, revving the engine loudly. "I like that," he says, satisfied, after cutting it off.

THE NEXT TIME I see 21 Savage, he's thrilling a sold-out crowd at Paris' Zénith Arena. His show begins with a white cloth backdrop across the stage. The air swells and ripples the fabric as headlines on Savage's ICE arrest fill it; next, footage of European flags and streetscapes takes over. "This is our city," says Savage, a disembodied narrator, not yet onstage. From the moment he emerges, two spotlights tail him and the background morphs into the Stars and Stripes, waving slowly.

The crowd erupts when Savage emerges, rapping the first words of "Runnin'," from *Savage Mode II*. As the set goes on, a story unfolds. A stage-length screen behind Savage shows vignettes of the life of a young Black boy who, at different points, rinses blood from his hands, runs through the streets in a frantic blur, and looks lost in the dark. The boy looks nothing like Savage, but endures the kind of struggle, danger, and violence we know he has. It isn't all bleak; there are lively graphics interspersed, like a meter measuring the freakiness of the crowd during "10 Freaky Girls."

Yet, as we come in and out of the boy's POV, the audience is confronted by a pitbull; later, a wall of nightmarish eyes. Throughout the show, a CGI home goes from trap-house commotion – the flash of police lights reflected from the windows and the clamor of disarray filling the air – to an idyllic suburban house, with birds chirping, thriving rose bushes, and an American flag draped from it.

For the tour, Savage hired two creative directors, Danny Seth and Ben Wolin, alongside producer Matt Bauerschmidt. Wolin says Savage will explore the motif of the American dream over the next year, though they realize some of the themes apply the world over. They decided to use Savage's global moment to tell a universal story of the dark underbelly of dream-chasing and the turbulent path to a peaceful life. "We pulled a lot of references from Savage himself," says Wolin.

Paris is elated to spend the evening with him. There's camaraderie and ease, with barely any security workers visible. As the night ends, he thanks the audience for being his first stop around the world.

LONDON IS THE LAST STOP, for now. There, Savage makes a slightly different entrance: This time, he's revealed to be behind the white curtain after it plummets to the floor. "London, make some motherfucking *nooooooooise*!" he commands before offering a much cooler "I'm back, bitch." He two-steps to "Who Told You," by British rapper J Hus, who pops up to perform the song. Savage later plays the ultimate hype man to London's latest rap sensation, Central Cee. Then, hearkening back to his Caribbean roots, he hits a smiley sway when dancehall star Popcaan pops out, too.

One of the first things Savage did when he touched down in London was, in fact, visit his grandmother, who was still in the same council estate that he remembered. "She was shocked," he tells me. "She started crying." He visited twice, the second time bringing his kids, who took warmly to the great-grandma they'd only ever known from phone calls. He found time to shoot a music video in Brixton as well. He says the area looked exactly as he remembered it.

Savage's mom, Heather, joined him on the trip. They took the kids to Windsor Castle, and dabbled in magic at a tour of the Warner Bros. studios where the *Harry Potter* films were made. In his own moment of play, Savage was spotlighted on the sidelines of London's Arsenal Football Club, where he beamed and waved the custom jersey he was presented with.

His kids told him they had fun and can't wait to go back. Neither can he, and he says it won't be long.

"What did it feel like?" I ask him over Zoom a few days after the London concert, while he's settling down at home in Atlanta. "It probably was my most, what's the word...?" he says, pausing for a beat. "Passionate show."

Savage thinks he and the audience shared something special. "I want to thank each and every one of y'all for buying a ticket to come see me," he had told them before the night ended, also announcing he had an album on the way. "I went through a lot of bullshit to make it on this stage tonight with y'all."

[*Cont. from 51*] "I lifted the lid of a bucket and I knew immediately [that this was different] from his previous work, which was legit," Sarah says. Jeremy's specimens were usually antique, preserved in jars with labels explaining their provenance. But this looked like a bucket full of loose organs.

Sarah went back upstairs to eventually call the police, handing over everything she'd found in the basement, along with Jeremy's laptop, which he'd left behind when he was evicted. On it, the police – and later the FBI – found that Jeremy had been allegedly buying and selling body parts, the center of a web of brazen bandits that stretched across the country.

JEREMY PAULEY CONNECTED with Scott, the mortuary worker in Arkansas, through a Facebook oddities group, according to an indictment. In October 2021, Scott messaged him: "Would you know anyone in the market for a fully in tact [sic], embalmed brain?"

He ended up sending her $1,200 via PayPal for two brains and a heart.

Over the course of their relationship, Scott allegedly sold Pauley organs, genitalia, and on more than one occasion, fetuses. Along with working with morgue employees, Pauley did business with other collectors. According to an indictment, Maclean, of the creepy-doll store, enlisted Pauley to tan human skin into leather, which, Sarah says, he often used to bind books or make wallets.

These horrifying details are stomach-churning. And while it may be easy to get distracted by them, forgetting about the real-life victims and their grieving families, each person has their own story – and it's heartbreaking to think of them. Like the stillborn whose mother had named him Lux – Scott allegedly sold him for $300 to Pauley, who traded him to Minnesota tattoo artist Matthew Lampi (who was also named in the indictment and pleaded not guilty) for $1,550 plus five human skulls. After the loss of her child, a funeral home that had the haunting misfortune of working with Scott's mortuary gave Lux's mother a box of mysterious ashes instead of her son.

All told, prosecutors say tens of thousands of dollars changed hands in this gruesome years-long scheme: One indictment states that Pauley sent Taylor more than $40,000; Lampi paid Pauley more than $8,000; and Pauley paid Lampi more than $100,000. Sarah estimates that her ex made a couple hundred thousand dollars in total.

Those listed in the main indictment weren't Pauley's only "customers," which means this network spread further than it seems.

Pauley was also online pals with a Kentucky man named James Nott, who in his Facebook messages to Pauley went by the name William Burke – a grisly nod to a murderer from the 1800s who sold his victims' corpses to Scottish anatomist Robert Knox for dissection demonstrations.

Nott was nabbed by the FBI in July 2023, after agents reviewed Facebook messages between him and Pauley discussing bones Pauley was interested in buying. When they raided Nott's home, which held a stash of weapons, he was only arrested for possession of a firearm by a convicted felon. His home was like something from a horror show, decorated with dozens of human skulls, spinal cords, and hip bones – but he wasn't selling to the few states where such sales are prohibited. And, he insists, he wasn't doing anything illegal.

In texts to me from Oldham County jail, Nott endeavors to distance himself from Lodge, claiming to have never received stolen goods from the Harvard morgue – despite the fact that after his arrest investigators found a Harvard Medical School bag among his belongings. Nott also stresses to me that he only collects bones, not organs or body parts. It's a distinction that does little to alleviate the horror victims' families felt when they read news stories about Nott's arrest.

As I spoke to those families over the past several months, the same question came up again and again – a question I, too, have grappled with as I pieced together this story. Why? Why would the people trusted to take care of these bodies risk their careers? Why did they betray that trust? And why, exactly, would anyone be willing to cause this kind of pain in pursuit of a grisly hobby and extra cash?

As for Cedric Lodge, it's unlikely we'll have an answer to that question until the trial, which begins in April. And none of the other main defendants are talking, given ongoing investigations and litigations. Lampi's attorney declined to comment on the case – although he did tell me that in 39 years as a criminal lawyer, he's never seen anything like this situation. Maclean's attorney didn't return my request for comment.

But for Nott, at least, he claims that his collection is meant to honor the dead rather than desecrate them. He tells me that he started collecting his "dead friends" after a friend died by suicide. "All the pieces I have collected, I've kept on antique furniture and placed roses and flowers around them and gave them their own names, as if keeping them alive," he wrote to me, adding that his fellow prisoners call him "the Bone Man."

As for Jeremy Pauley, the alleged linchpin in this shuddersome saga, Sarah says she believes her soon-to-be-ex-husband did it, in part, for the money. But she says of Pauley, whose website is still active, emblazoned with a photo of the man in a dark suit, face half in shadow: "He definitely didn't have a moral compass.... He'd be like, 'This is from a murder victim.' He would know the story behind [the bodies]. But he'd cut shit up like it was just another Tuesday."

About one year after Sarah descended her basement steps, the Lodges, Taylor, and Maclean were indicted on June 13, 2023, for conspiracy and interstate transport of stolen goods; Pauley was indicted a day later in a separate filing. Scott was indicted a few months earlier, in April. Pauley took a plea deal, pleading guilty in September 2023 to purchasing "human remains from multiple individuals knowing that those remains were stolen [and] selling many of the stolen remains to others, at least one of whom also knew they had been stolen," according to the Department of Justice. He faces up to 15 years in prison. Scott is scheduled to go to court in March 2024. And Nott changed his plea to guilty in November 2023.

A report promising to assess the Harvard Medical School donation program to prevent future thefts has been delayed twice, with no word on when it will be delivered.

AS FOR THE families, they want to remember the people they loved before they became "goods" to barter and sell – and they want the world to know them, too. That's why after the news broke, many turned to the legal system, suing Harvard and the others involved in an effort to make sure that the memories of their fathers, mothers, and grandparents didn't get lost.

Most of the stories they tell me about their loved ones are universal, a comforting haze of good days and meals around dining-room tables. Paula Peltonovich's father was not the only one to throw huge Sunday dinners every week; Janet Pizzi remembers her uncle, Michael Pizzi, doing the same with his brother, with whom he worked real estate well into his nineties.

More than one family remembers a loved one's secret recipe: There's Harvard-trained pediatrician William R. Buchanan's famous carrot cake, which his granddaughters Lilli Pacher-King and Ellen Weiss refused to eat due to the natural aversion many children have to vegetables. (He made bowls of cream-cheese icing for them instead.) Amy and Jenny Gordon remember munching through countless batches of their mother Doreen Gordon's macaroons, one of the confections that earned her the neighborhood name "the Cookie Lady." Cookies "were her way of being known to other people, but also was a way of her saying to other people that she recognized them," Amy recalls. "And I think they felt visible to her. And she was visible to them." And Robyn D'Apolito and Nicole MacTaggart say their mother was famous for her pork fried rice.

Cathie Riordan's father, Frank, donated his body to Harvard because he wanted to do something big with his life, to be remembered. He was a musician who hosted karaoke nights well into his sixties and never stopped singing, even when he went to a care home.

Then there's Amber Haggstrom's mom, Donna Pratt, a drag-racing car fanatic nicknamed "Miss Pyro." "When I got my mom's ashes I was so excited to have her back," Haggstrom says, adding that she used to talk to them every morning. "I look at the ashes differently [after the Harvard news]. I feel like I'm almost losing that bond."

That's another thing these families have in common: Their memories are tainted by what happened to them after their loved ones died. And now, they're trying their best to hold onto the people they've lost.

As I sit with Adele Mazzone's daughters, D'Apolito and MacTaggart, on a muggy August afternoon around a flowery tablecloth, the sisters piece through the ephemera of their mother's life. "I just think she'd be so disheartened to know the lack of prestige and integrity that Harvard now stands for," D'Apolito says with a sigh, before turning back to a photo of her daughter, Brianna, and their mother standing in front of a slate-gray sea.

"Have you heard the poem 'The Dash'?" D'Apolito asks. At 59, she's got more than a decade on her younger half sister, but with her carefully styled blond hair and a brassy laugh, they seem close in age. "You get your birth date, your death date – but what's in between? That's the dash." Mazzone's dash is spread across that table. There are written recollections of the tragedies, like her brother and son, lost at young ages, and snapshots of the bright moments, the black-and-white photos of her apple-cheeked younger days, colorful snaps of more recent holidays.

"We have to relive this over and over. Envisioning my mom's head being cut off. What did they do to her body? Why couldn't I help her?" D'Apolito says, her eyes glazing with tears as she gazes distractedly at the bright blue and silver balloons bobbing by the mantel, detritus from her nephew's birthday. "It's not that someone who wasn't a good person deserved that, but she really didn't. Her 'dash' was pure goodness and giving."

[*Cont. from 55*] anymore. He gave up his amateur standing and moved up to adult competition at 16, bowling in as many tournaments as he could, his entrance fees staked by the same bowlers he'd grown up practicing next to – for a percentage of the winnings in return, of course.

Simonsen's parents split for good when he was a teenager. Teresa moved in with her mother, and Benjamin was laid off, failed to find another job, and fell into what Simonsen describes as a deep, lasting depression. When his dad was evicted from their family home, Simonsen moved him into an apartment and started paying his rent with tournament winnings. Simonsen continued to support Benjamin financially until his death in 2021.

Driving his dad's truck without a license, Simonsen started racking up tickets when he was 15. "If there was a bowling tournament within seven hours, I was bowling the tournament, there's no question about it. I gotta figure out how to get to the tournaments or else I'm not gonna make any money." Eventually, he started using his bowling winnings to buy cheap used cars. After a disagreement over his constant travel and odd hours with a manager at Plano, Simonsen took a warehouse job stocking shelves and filling orders at Classic Products, a national bowling distributor.

In 2015, shortly after Simonsen's 18th birthday, his mother passed away unexpectedly. "I think she worked herself to death," Simonsen says, and then, without flinching, "I get my work ethic from her."

In December of that same year, Simonsen won his first PBA Tour title, missing Norm Duke's record for youngest title winner by two days thanks to a months-long delay between the event's qualifying round and finals. The next year, at 19 years old, Simonsen won the 2016 Masters, taking home a giant novelty check for $50,000, another five-figure incentive check from his ball sponsor, Roto Grip, and a place in the record books as the youngest major-title winner in PBA history. He got his first driver's license shortly after.

"Bowling is what I've got. It's what I know," Simonsen says. "If I didn't have bowling or the bowling industry, I don't know where I would be."

SIMONSEN HAS ALWAYS bowled with two hands. Two-handers are generally known for their power, but Simonsen has found success with finesse. He attacks the lanes with more versatility and guts than anyone on tour, throwing straight up the right side of the gutter one game, and lofting it over the left gutter cap with a boomerang hook the next, tricking the ball like a Cy Young winner, taking gambles with equipment and lane play that would never even occur to most pros.

Listed online at a generous five feet nine, with a stocky build and a baby face hidden behind a bushy beard that adds a few years, Simonsen's five-step approach to the foul line drifts slightly to the left. On the third step, he does a quick shrug, cocking his forearms like a shotgun as his upper body drops near parallel with the lane. His fourth step plants with power as the ball swings behind him. His fifth step slides to the foul line as his coiled body springs forward, uncorking like a jack-in-the-box as the ball explodes out of his hands.

PBA Commissioner Tom Clark describes Simonsen as a "genius" without a single weakness in his game, besides his famously short fuse. When it comes to playing the lanes, though, Simonsen's creativity, bag of tricks, and ability to adapt are not just unmatched, they're downright outlandish. When he was 21, Simonsen won the first PBA title using a backup ball – that is, bowling a reverse hook to roll the ball clockwise on the left side of the lane instead of his natural counterclockwise from the right. He bowled backward. In the championship game, Simonsen defeated lefty Matt Sanders 216-194 on his own side of the lane.

Oh, yeah, and thanks to a drunk prank the night before by Kyle Troup, a 10-time PBA title winner famous for his Bob Ross-like Afro, Simonsen was without his own gear and bowled the second half of the tournament, including the title match, in a pair of borrowed shoes two sizes too big. "He does things that other people do when they're goofing off to win [PBA] events," Clark says.

In an era of professional sports defined by helicopter parents, forced specialization, and private coaches for preteens, Simonsen's self-taught savant – and the daring imagination that comes with it – is a breath of fresh air.

ON THE WAY out of the surprise trip to South Point, Simonsen stops for two more photos, joking with a thirtysomething bowler decked out in full Raiders gear who freaks out and fumbles his words in front of his girlfriend as soon as he sees Simonsen.

Simonsen moved to Vegas in 2020 for an opportunity to own and operate the bowling alley inside of a video-game-themed bar on Fremont Street called the Nerd. Flying home between tour stops, he spent the past three years rehabbing and fixing the lanes and running the center. Earlier this year, Simonsen sold his portion of the Nerd because of a clash of personalities with his business partner.

The departure gave him more time to work at Classic's West Coast warehouse in Henderson, Nevada. Working the same job he had when he was 17, Simonsen clocks in at $15 an hour to unload skids of bowling balls, redesign shelving units, and help build fully functional pin decks and lane machines inside the warehouse. Technically, Simonsen has been employed by Classic for the better part of a decade. When he put in his two-weeks notice at Classic's Texas warehouse in 2015 to join the PBA Tour full time, national sales manager Jimmy Land, a Dallas local who, along with his wife Jan, has known and cared for Simonsen "since he was knee high to a grasshopper," never took him off the payroll. Simonsen's bowling family has always been there.

A number of PBA pros have started spending more time in the gym lately, rejecting the beer-and-bratwurst image of pro bowling's past and treating their athletic careers like, well, athletic careers. But Simonsen gets his strength training in at the warehouse, moving pallets of bowling balls. His deep knowledge of bowling equipment, learned over years working at Plano, Classic, and the Nerd, at times contributes to his frustration on the lanes. Professional tournaments played in the same centers that host unlimited Wednesday specials just a few days earlier sometimes result in off-center racks and clogged hand driers. Simonsen is often the first and loudest person to call out PBA officials. "When he does complain, I always say we need to listen to him because he's usually right, I'll admit that," Clark says. "The time and place he goes about expressing it might not always be the best, but he's usually not wrong."

Like John McEnroe, Tiger Williams, Serena Williams, and pro bowling's most famous face, Pete Weber, Simonsen's temper and the intensity that it takes to win are two sides of the same coin. "There are times where because I've got a little heated I'll bowl better, I'm more focused on what I'm doing," Simonsen says. The PBA has been on an upswing lately, but the tour still has a long way to go to even sniff the money at stake in sports like golf and tennis. At this point, pro-bowling stadiums are still a pipe dream. With the Nerd out of his hands, Simonsen needed a new place to practice in Vegas. South Point is the popular choice for local PBA and regional pros, but Simonsen has found a home at the Compound.

Twenty minutes off the Strip, past the sun-soaked strip malls and the empty gravel lots that will eventually become strip malls, the Compound is a mansion owned by professional poker player Chris "Huni" Hunichen. The property has a home gym and indoor basketball court, indoor pool, outdoor pool complete with grotto, and a separate covered hot tub, and that's all before you get in the house. Inside, past the home theater, where we stop for five minutes and watch Hunichen lose $42,000 gambling on an early-morning UFC fight live in London, next to the kitchen and behind the gigantic fish tank are a pair of bowling lanes. Simonsen and Hunichen have become fast friends since his Vegas move, and after Simonsen sold his portion of the Nerd, Hunichen suggested he start practicing here.

We bowl a couple of games, Simonsen kindly humoring my futile yet insatiable desire to test my talent against the best. He beats the brakes off me, bowling over 240 rolling his pink spare ball backup on the left side of the lane. The display is equal parts humiliating and awe-inspiring. On the way out, another UFC fight is finishing up, so we sit for a second and watch Hunichen win back all 42 grand plus more.

When we talk about Simonsen's childhood and teenage years, he speaks about his parents with reverence and understanding. Life is hard and they tried their best, even if their best didn't always cut it. Simonsen has never lacked for chosen family though; he drives his girlfriend Morgan to work every morning, and they recently sent their dog Snoop to a trainer to fix his behavioral issues. And he still regularly sees the faces that helped raise him in Dallas bowling centers. Land and his wife still run things at Classic, and they visit the Henderson warehouse often. Simonsen's brother Bobby has been clean for years, he's back bowling seriously, and they are each other's biggest fans. They talk frequently, and Bobby boasts a photorealistic tattoo of Simonsen raising his first PBA trophy on his leg, the words "Born to Kill" written underneath. "I've finally started to slowly transition out of survival mode," Simonsen tells me. "To, I don't want to say find more enjoyment in life, but to know 'Cool, I'll be all right,' and now I might actually sit down and try to set some goals – like shit to look forward to, because before it was just day by day. I think I had just been stuck in that mindset."

On the drive back to the Strip from the Compound, I ask Simonsen if he has any goals for the 2024 PBA season. He thinks about it for a second. "Not really," he admits. He doesn't care about Player of the Year, he just wants to win more. I ask about long-term plans. "The Hall of Fame," but he knows the résumé is already there, so now he just needs the 20 years on tour to be eligible, and that should come in due time. Hell, he's already coming up on 10 years in, and he's only 26. Other than that? "Just keep striking."

[*Cont. from 47*] "A better, smarter legal team than last time" is how a person close to Trump put it.

Another person with knowledge of this matter says that the ex-president has already fielded meetings and phone calls from conservative lawyers who are, in the source's characterization, preemptively "auditioning" for roles on such a legal team, should one be formed this year.

As recently as this summer, Trump had talked to right-leaning legal counselors about the feasibility of laying the groundwork for various post-election "audits" of mailed ballots – inspired partly by a shambolic Arizona audit following the 2020 election – in parts of the United States that have historical track records of so-called problems, two sources present for these casual discussions recall.

There are few people more central to Trump's plans than Cleta Mitchell, the lawyer pushing the secretaries of state to pull out of ERIC at that D.C. meeting. As recently as September, Trump privately praised Mitchell's work, saying she is going to be "very important" for the next election and beyond.

Once a member of the old-school Republican mainstream, Mitchell has become the most ardent of election deniers. Along with participating in Trump's 2021 call with Raffensperger, she stunned a Fox News host on-air in November 2020 when she challenged the election results days after the network had already called the election for Biden.

That embrace of Trump dogma has given her staying power in the former president's network of influential allies. But, according to two people with direct knowledge of the situation, it irks some of Trump's top attorneys working on his various criminal cases – many of which grew out of schemes to overturn the 2020 election. "Cleta is too militant, even for me," one such lawyer says.

Mitchell sent a lengthy email in response to our reporting, which included insisting that ERIC "is a way to accomplish one of the left's objectives, and to do so at taxpayer expense: register more people" to vote, "not removing bad registrations." Mitchell offered up a number of her recurring criticisms of ERIC, Soros, and ERIC co-founder Becker, and noted: "I am proud of the work that we are doing and have been doing for the past three years and, yes, I think that what we are doing to try to restore the rule of law in elections is very important." She also accused ROLLING STONE of participating in "attacks" on "election integrity" activists, and also "me specifically."

CONFUSION HAS FOLLOWED in the states Mitchell has persuaded to pull out from ERIC. Former member states have found themselves suddenly deprived of accurate voter-registration data and have scrambled to try to re-create a version of ERIC through side agreements with their neighbors still in the network, says Schmidt, the Pennsylvania secretary. He's seen some states frantically search to find the most rudimentary public voter-registration data. "All you need is $20 and the ability to use Excel to do the analysis they're doing," he says.

But absent the kind of very specific personal information that's only available through ERIC, "the data is going to be garbage and potentially result in voters being disenfranchised," according to Schmidt. "You cannot just use, for example, name and birthday to go about taking steps to remove a voter," he says. "That will result in a terrific number of false matches."

The argument is more than theoretical. In 2005, Kansas developed the Interstate Voter Registration Crosscheck Program. Much like ERIC, the network pledged to help states improve the accuracy of the data underlying their voter rolls by allowing member states to share registration information.

But Crosscheck relied heavily on using registrants' names and birthdays to check for potentially duplicate registrations, leading to high rates of false positives. In one academic study of Crosscheck data, researchers found that the program wrongly flagged 99 percent of registrations. In 2019, Kansas agreed to settle a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union and shut down Crosscheck following a data breach that exposed personal information of voters shared by the program.

With the demise of Crosscheck, and as larger, conservative-led states have walked away from ERIC, pro-Trump activists like Mitchell have promoted a new tool, dubbed the EagleAI Network, for states that have left the nonprofit. EagleAI was developed in 2022 by John W. Richards, a medical doctor and health care CEO from Alabama.

Mitchell has a number of ties to EagleAI, as the investigative watchdog Documented first detailed, including helping the group with strategic planning, legal advice, and hosting demonstrations of the software for her Election Integrity Network nonprofit.

EagleAI's developers hinted at their ambition for the software in an August article for Just the News, a pro-Trump outlet. In the article and company documents published with the piece, the company said it wanted the software to be "the solution across the nation for use at all levels of Voter Roll validation, maintenance, and review." In an email to ROLLING STONE, Richards said that "while EagleAI could replace ERIC, doing so is not its mission."

EagleAI claims that "hundreds of individuals and county election offices in 23 states have shown "interest" in using it. In December, the company gained its first government user in Georgia's Republican-dominated Columbia County, though the state's own director of elections, Blake Evans, said in a statement earlier this year that the EagleAI presentations he has seen are "confused and seem to steer counties towards unlawful list-maintenance activities."

Schmidt, Pennsylvania's top election official, is critical of software like EagleAI. "The data sets that they're looking to use, such as property-tax records, should not be used to generate a list of voters who are ineligible" to vote, according to Schmidt, because plenty of eligible voters don't always appear on them. "There's any number of spouses who do not show up on property-tax records. No one who rents an apartment will show up on property-tax records."

The software, he says, is "utterly unreliable" as a replacement for ERIC and would likely result in "a terrific number of challenges to voters who are registered and eligible," as well as litigation against states or counties who use it for those purposes.

Richards tells ROLLING STONE that property-tax records are only "a small part of the property data that EagleAI uses." "To say that EagleAI data is 'utterly unreliable' is to also say that ERIC data is unreliable – we use the same primary sources," he says. Richards acknowledges that "EagleAI does not have the Personal Protected Information that ERIC has," like drivers-license numbers and partial Social Security numbers. But, he claims, "this does not make EagleAI less accurate."

EagleAI also markets its platform for use not just by state and county election officials, but by ordinary citizens to spot "potential problem registrations for review and/or election challenges." Conservative groups have already sponsored training sessions for activists to use the software, according to Documented.

Even aside from its potential use in government, some fear activists could use software like EagleAI to flood election officials with needless challenges to voters' eligibility. "EagleAI presents a few concerns," explains Andrew Garber, an attorney with the Brennan Center for Justice's voting-rights and elections program. "One of them being that it seems to be a tool made to generate mass challenges."

Garber says tools like EagleAI that can facilitate mass voter-eligibility challenges are "concerning" because of the effect they could have on election administration. "The people who run our elections have a lot to do. And when they get hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of challenges at the same time, they often have to investigate and come to determinations on those, which takes them away from their other really important work." He adds that such tools can also "spread disinformation by giving the appearance that there's something wrong with the voter rolls when, in fact, there isn't."

Richards dismisses such concerns, saying any challenges would "be due to the fact that there are a high number of problem registrations," rather than anything to do with his software. He says EagleAI "will make county election officials more efficient" at handling challenges "because it makes finding evidentiary documentation more efficient and accurate." He calls allegations that EagleAI could facilitate disinformation "laughable." In her email to ROLLING STONE, Mitchell defended EagleAI, claiming, "EagleAI as an alternative to ERIC simply means that it is a tool that will do what ERIC claims to do but doesn't."

IF TRUMP AND his lieutenants get their way, it's possible that the failed efforts of 2020 and 2021 (culminating with the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol) could be remembered as a mere dress rehearsal for whatever happens next – particularly if the presidential election is close.

The hollowing out of ERIC has started while EagleAI begins to take root. The speaker of the House is no longer just someone who will tolerate and back Trump's 2020 election lies, but is now a man who once took the lead on Capitol Hill in trying to nullify that election outcome. And no one and no organization in the Republican Party that truly matters is pushing back on Trump's authoritarianism; they're adapting to it even when they aren't excitedly throwing their arms around it.

In January 2023, Merrill stepped down as Alabama's secretary of state, two years after admitting to "an inappropriate relationship" that upended his political career. His successor, Wes Allen, worked fast to do what Merrill would not. "Secretary of State Wes Allen has officially withdrawn from the Electronic Registration Information Center as his first official act in office," a press release triumphantly announced.

Still, as Merrill decries MAGA elites' assault on ERIC as a destructive endeavor, he nevertheless maintains common cause with even the most zealous of anti-ERIC conservatives. They all want to see Trump restored to the Oval Office, come January 2025.

Merrill tells ROLLING STONE he is now running – unopposed – to be an Alabama Trump delegate for the 2024 Republican National Convention.

"When I spoke to [Trump] in August, I told him I would be helpful," Merrill says. "He's already given me some tasks."

[*Cont. from 61*] THE HOUSE WHERE Korina Ellison says she was first sex-trafficked no longer exists. It once stood on an unassuming lot in a residential suburb of Portland, Oregon, that stumbles down to the banks of the Willamette River. Now, Ellison can't quite bring the house's features to mind. She was so young back then, maybe four or five. There is so much she's repressed, or only pieced together after the fact. As a child, she wouldn't have known what she now believes to be true: that her grandmother scored her drugs by offering up her youngest daughter, Ellison's mom. Or that, once her mom was hooked on the meth cooked by the man who'd lived in that house, she'd known just what to do to get more. But Ellison does remember being inside the house, unclothed. She does remember how the man would touch her.

Her life unspooled from there. Her father died of a heroin overdose when she was six. Her mom lost custody for good. She bounced around foster care, then various residential institutions, then whatever shelter she could find. In the story she tells of how she was sex-trafficked again in her teenage years, there's no moment of drama, no kidnapping, no clear coercion. There was just a random, rainy afternoon when she had no place to go and was alone in the street and a car pulled up. The man inside took her home with him, fed her, introduced her to his girlfriend. They took her shopping. They let her stay. When men showed up at the home to have sex with the woman, Ellison was invited to watch, but she wasn't expected to participate – not at first, anyway. According to a statement Ellison later made to law enforcement, she just "realized that people aren't going to take care of [me] for free." Soon, the woman was posting Ellison's services on Backpage – $150 for half an hour, $200 for a full one – and the trio were traveling the Midwest. For a long time, it didn't even occur to Ellison, then 16, to leave. "Where would I have gone?" she asks. "I'd been missing for over a year. Nobody was looking for me." When the man told her to call him "Daddy," she complied.

That was more than a decade ago, near the beginning of Badolato's tenure as head of the Child Exploitation Task Force. But by 2021, leaving it had seemed a necessary form of self-preservation. One of her last cases had gone well legally: The perp, a retired police officer from California who had produced child sex-abuse materials of three sisters in Manila, had pleaded guilty to such charges when he learned that Badolato had brought the girls to the states to testify against him. But the experience had been emotionally devastating for Badolato, who had wanted the sisters, then 16, 13, and 11, to have memories of the U.S that consisted of more than reliving their trauma in a courtroom. She took them shopping and to the zoo, invited them to her home to have dinner with her own family, saw them slowly start to open up and laugh and behave like the children they were. Then she'd had to put them on a flight back to Manila, back to the aunt who had allowed the man to abuse them and who Badolato had been unable to extradite. Fortunately, she says, their estranged father ended up intervening and taking custody of the girls, but that feeling of futility in the fight lingered.

"I stayed for a little bit longer after that trial, but it really was when I should have been able to look myself in the mirror and say, 'Nikki, you're done,'" Badolato had told me in St. Louis. "It became clear that I had been doing it too long." She'd spend the last couple of years working national security, a position without the immediacy of child-exploitation work, but also without the heartache. "If I can be perfectly honest, I truly don't believe that the FBI realizes what they put their agents through doing that kind of work. I just don't," she says.

And yet, here Badolato was in Portland, leading Ellison, now 30, up to her hotel room, telling her about all the announcements she'd heard in the Atlanta airport instructing travelers to be on the lookout for sex trafficking. "It's like white noise in the background," she says as Ellison settles into the sofa. "It's a false sense of doing something to help."

"Here's the thing: Nobody knows what to look for," Ellison agrees.

"And what about the victims who are in that airport, who are walking around and listening?" Badolato asks.

"I wouldn't have even heard that announcement," Ellison replies. "Because I didn't feel like a victim. It goes a lot, lot, lot deeper than anybody realizes."

That's what she and Badolato both understand. That's why they started talking eight months ago. Of all the teenage victims Badolato's task force recovered, Ellison is one of the few who she knows has permanently extricated herself from being prostituted, though it took years for her to get to that point, years for her to see that what happened to her was not her fault but rather a fault in the system, a fault in many systems over the course of generations. Neither she nor Badolato can fix that.

Yet they can't help feeling like there's something they can fix – or at least try to. Under the umbrella of an organization she's founded called Innocent Warriors, Badolato created a program for schools, instructing educators on the signs that might indicate a student is being trafficked and teaching kids how to avoid getting groomed online, which, she believes, is not about stranger danger but rather an awareness of subtle manipulation. Ellison has been working with trafficked youth through nonprofits like Children of the Night, the residential program where Badolato's team sent her when she was 17. Together, they've been talking about having Ellison help train undercovers who are learning to do trafficking sting ops. They've also discussed starting a mentorship program in which children who are still being sex-trafficked are paired with young adults like Ellison who once were, providing a way for victims to begin to envision a different future for themselves and a path toward it even while being prostituted. Such a program may be retroactive rather than proactive, but it would capitalize on Badolato's and Ellison's experience and expertise – and it could help in the healing of mentors and mentees alike.

Badolato had traveled to Portland for the two to talk face-to-face about how the program might work. "You have to understand how they've been traumatized because sometimes, to a child, relating doesn't sound like you're relating. It sounds like you're pointing out all the bad things in them," says Ellison from the driver's seat of her Nissan Pathfinder as she drives Badolato around to show her certain landmarks of her past after she'd left Children of the Night: the bridge she'd slept under for over a year after a boyfriend had gotten her hooked on heroin, the blocks downtown where she'd bounced between a children's shelter and the needle exchange. It had taken a prison sentence for her to finally break her addiction and commit to a different kind of life, though that evolution had had less to do with not having access to drugs than with seeing her own mother cycle in and out of the same facility – like looking into her own future and witnessing how bleak it would be. Maybe, she thought, she could provide the inverse of that for kids in Innocent Warriors. Maybe she could reverse engineer her own escape.

"I just want to make it very clear that if you were a victim, you are a victim, and just to not have any shame in that," she tells Badolato as they drive through Portland's misty streets.

"What I anticipate and hope is that then we get survivors that are like, 'They get it,'" Badolato replies. "And that it opens up doors to help, for people to recognize that there are people who get what's really going on."

"It took a really long time for me," Ellison says of coming to terms with her own victimhood.

"It's like reworking your thought process about some of those things," Badolato agrees. "And that's hard, and it happens slowly over time, and it looks different for everybody."

Ellison grips the wheel tightly. "The truth does matter. It does. The truth is the fucking truth. And it's been empowering to be able to talk about it because that's another way that I've realized, like, 'Man, I was a victim,' is re-going over all of this. Because when it happens so many times, you do blame yourself. It's a lot easier to just continue to live in a lie than believe that you were lied to."

Still, Ellison and Badolato agree that the impressionability that makes children vulnerable is also what makes them open to guidance and mentorship if a relationship of trust can be established. "What do you think a parent does? They groom you. I'd been waiting to be guided and groomed," Ellison says.

It's been instructive to see that potential from another perspective, as a mother doing the guiding. As the afternoon wears on, Ellison stops to pick up her then-15-month-old son, who was being watched by a social-worker friend. She buckles the little boy into his car seat, ruffles his hair, and passes him a bottle. He grins widely and begins removing his shoes and socks, throwing them gleefully onto the floor of the car and then kicking his tiny feet in time with the music as Ellison glances back at him and smiles. "Kids are so perfect," she says.

The last stop of the day is the large plot of land where the drug dealer's house once stood. Now, it's been turned into a playground, with brightly-colored jungle gyms, a covered picnic area, and a large lawn, where a couple leisurely walks their dog. Ellison and Badolato climb down from the car and stand at the park's edge, as Ellison's son toddles around the grass, oblivious to what had transpired in that very spot. There is some form of poetic justice in the land being earmarked for children's enjoyment, but neither woman voices it. Mostly, they're quiet. Night is falling, the air growing cooler, and the gray sky fading into dusk.

"You would never think a park could hide what it used to be," Ellison says at last. And yet it did. Driving off with Badolato at her side and her son babbling happily in the back seat, Ellison glances in the rearview mirror, but only for a moment. Badolato keeps her eyes fixed only on the road ahead.

If you or someone you know may be involved in trafficking, call the toll-free NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE *at 888-373-7888, text the hotline at 233733, or talk online at humantraffickinghotline.org/chat.*

Chaka Khan

The 'Queen of Funk' on addiction, her Kanye beef, and her musical legacy

One of the titles you considered for your memoir years ago was *To Hell and Back in a Limousine*. What, for you, was the "hell" part?
Riding on a bus, pissing in a little bathroom, waking up in the morning, and you're five hours from your hotel where you can take a proper bath or shower and go to bed like a normal human being. And then you got a gig that night. That's friggin' insane. It was just insanity. It's like being a truck driver and a performer. It's lonely as all get-out.

Chaka Khan was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in November.

You've talked about winding down your touring career. I've had artists like Keith Richards tell me they want to die onstage — clearly that's not you.
Some people, that's all they have, you know? I got this rich-ass life. I've got great-grandchildren I want to get to know better. So I will not do another tour. I'll do dates, but it won't look like a tour. They'll be far enough apart that I can have time to sleep in between.

Will you ever retire from performing altogether?
Well, I might do that three or four times, like other bitches do [*laughs*].

A story people might not know is that Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" was originally a duet with you — and the label erased your vocals for apparently racist reasons. How do you see that incident?
On so many levels, it was a bad call. I did go through a period because of "Addicted to Love" where I was very hurt. And I marveled at how something so pure and simple and beautiful could be just wiped off the face of the Earth because of money.

How much do you think about legacy, about your music being heard when you're gone someday?
I don't really care. I would hope that some of my shit has some longevity, but if it doesn't, that'll be because hopefully somebody better has come along. I just hope that the art form doesn't get so screwed up with stupid shit – kids today think that every instrument can be played on a keyboard. Instruments have to be introduced once again to these kids.

Did you ever have any mixed feelings about Whitney Houston covering "I'm Every Woman"?
Absolutely not. Because she did a stellar fucking job. I was flabbergasted! I said, "What, did you use my backing vocals on that?" She said, "Nah," and I said, "I'm gonna check it out!" We were very good friends. I miss her as much as I miss Prince. She was such an amazing human. Funny as hell and smart.

To clarify something, the reason you were annoyed with Kanye West about "Through the Wire" is that he asked to use your sampled voice, but didn't make it clear that it'd be sped up, right?
Yeah. And you know, that was my fault, too, for feeling salty about that in any way. Because if I understood the rap game more completely, like I do now, then that wouldn't have been a big deal to me.

So it doesn't bother you anymore?
No, I'm done. Please. I'm not hanging on to any silly grudges.

You once said that given your substance use, you don't know how you didn't become a casualty like so many other musicians. Have you gained any more insight as to how you made it?
No, it's a mystery. I could have easily been a casualty where I was at a couple of times in my life. You know, just by the grace of God.

What would a young Chaka Khan say to you?
She'd say, "Really?" I never, ever once thought that I'd be as well-known as I am today. Because that happened totally without my having to do anything with it, [besides] just my songs. I didn't have great people presenting me in a big way to the world. I am still amazed at how loved I am in this industry. BRIAN HIATT

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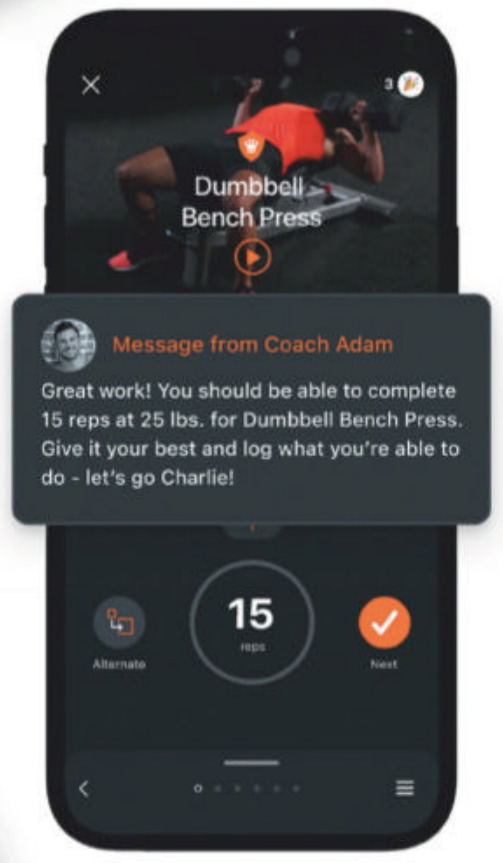

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